
HIGHLANDER'S
ANCIENT
VENGEANCE
ADAMINA YOUNG

Highlander's Ancient Vengeance

Adamina Young

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Prologue

She was furious. This man was one of the Dunbar workers; she knew that because her father had taken her around to meet every one of the men and their wives on the MacEwan estate. And this man was a stranger. She was not going to allow anyone with any connection to the Dunbars to wander about MacEwan land unchallenged!

Malle MacEwan was an expert horsewoman. Everyone on the MacEwan estate knew it, but she always looked tiny on top of her big war horse Arthur, whom she had named after the legendary King of the Britons. He was an enormous chestnut beast who was more than a ton of bulging muscles and had hooves the size of dinner plates. He would let no one else ride him but Malle, and with her, he was as gentle as a newborn lamb.

He did not look gentle now, though. Malle was in pursuit of a trespasser who had the temerity to venture onto MacEwan land, no doubt to poach the deer there. Some thieves had even tried to poach the wild boars, but those fearsome tusked pigs could take care of themselves, and it took a brave man to tackle one.

However, this man was not brave. Malle had heard him as she walked Arthur down to the burn to drink, and sat behind him to watch him squatting behind a bush and peering through the trees. She peered through the trunks of the closely-spaced pine trees to see what he was doing, but he seemed to be trying to make himself disappear, cowering behind a bush in terror.

Malle rode forward, then dismounted, confident that the trespasser had not seen her, but when she trod on a twig that broke under her feet, it snapped with a crack that made her flinch. The man looked up, and although his eyes were wide with fear, he moved fast. As Malle

stepped in front of him and tried to block his escape, he gave her a hefty push and she landed on her backside amongst the pine needles, then he jumped onto his horse and urged it forward. It leapt away and put on a surprising burst of speed before Malle had struggled to her feet.

She jumped into the saddle and Arthur sprung forward. The horse in front was smaller and much faster than big powerful Arthur over a short distance, although his sheer muscle power would win out in the end over a longer stretch. Moreover, a thick mist was rising from the waters of the Cut, the stream that separated the two estates, and the other rider was disappearing from sight. They were nearing Dunbar land, and Malle knew that it would be more than her life was worth to put a toe over the boundary. If she did, she was likely to be arrested and thrown into the Dunbar dungeon for as long as the Laird cared to keep her there.

Malle MacEwan was not afraid of many things; she had been trained in riding, swordsmanship, and archery by experts, and could also handle a knife and dagger with ease. There was only one thing in the world that gave her nightmares, and that was being put in a cage, a cell, or any small space from which she could not escape.

She could see that the boundary of the Dunbar land was now very close. It was a ten-foot-wide burn called the Cut, because it cut a line between the two estates.

Now I've got him! she thought triumphantly, expecting him to stop at any minute.

However, the smaller horse did not even slow down; it leapt from five feet behind the edge of the bank and landed the same distance away on the other side. Malle's jaw dropped open in surprise even as she scowled with rage. She brought Arthur to a halt at the water's edge and sat, fuming.

"If I ever see you on my father's land again," she said, and her voice throbbed with rage, "I will swipe that ugly head right off your skinny shoulders! Do you hear me?"

The man looked shocked and penitent, but Malle was not sure

whether his expression was genuine. “Why Mistress, it was wee Mairi here.” He patted his horse’s neck. “We were oot rabbit huntin’ an’ ane o’ the wee so-an’-so’s ran in front o’ her an’ gied her a fright. She threw me right on the flair an’ ran aff. Ye saw how she flew ower the burn—she jumped right intae your side o’ the fence. I went tae get her back, she is my only horse. I’m awfy sorry.”

“A most interesting tale,” Malle said dryly, cocking her head to one side and folding her arms. “Unfortunately, I do not believe it. I believe you were about for some less than honest purpose of your own.” Her voice was harsh.

The man shrugged and spread his hands. “I wis tellin’ ye the truth. I never tell a lie.” His face looked long and doleful.

Malle ignored the self-pitying whine of his voice. She sat looking at him for a while; he was an undersized creature with a small, sad face. “What is your name?” she demanded.

The man opened his mouth to answer, but someone else did it for him.

“His name is Fergus McDowell,” said a deep, gravelly voice. The owner of the voice came striding out of the mist. It was Craig Dunbar, the tall, strapping heir to the Dunbar estate, and judging by the thunderous scowl on his face, he did not look happy to see her.

1

Confrontation

Craig Dunbar's reputation preceded him, and looking at him, Malle could see why. Due to his extended stay in Aberdeen, she had not seen Craig since he was in his teens and she was a little girl, even though their estates were very close to each other. Even then it was only from a distance, since the Dunbars and MacEwans did not mix.

When he was eighteen and she was nine. He had seemed enormous, even though he had been much shorter than he was now. However, this was a different Craig; now he had grown taller and broadened out to become the epitome of masculinity.

He was well over six feet tall, with shoulders that suggested that he could plow a field or heft tree trunks on his own. She could not see his arms under his shirt, but she would wager that they were powerfully muscled, as were the calves she could see below his kilt.

His shoulder-length hair was a fiery shade of red, as was his closely-shaved beard, and he would have been attractive enough to give her palpitations had it not been for the forbidding scowl on his face. His feet were planted widely apart and his arms folded defensively across his body as he glared at her, and even though there was a small river separating them, she felt a twinge of uneasiness. He was a very big man, and she was tiny by comparison—in fact, she was a very small woman by any standards.

"Fine horse, Mistress MacEwan," he began. "I'll wager he was not cheap." His voice had a ring of sardonic amusement even though the fearsome expression on his face remained the same.

She was stung into retaliation at once. "The value of my horse is no business of yours, Dunbar!" she snapped, not giving him the courtesy

of his title as Laird Dunbar the Younger.

She saw his jaw tighten and his brow descend even further, and she felt an unholy surge of satisfaction. He might be as strong as an oak tree, but she had not yet met a man who could defeat her in a battle of words. And she was sure that Craig Dunbar would not fare any better than any of the others who had taken her on.

“I caught your man on my land,” Malle said angrily, pointing at Fergus, then at the thick branch he had used as a bridge to walk across the stream. “Up to no good, no doubt. I managed to stop him just in time. Did you send him?”

Malle had the satisfaction of seeing him bristle with anger. “NO I DID NOT!” he bellowed. He made himself calm down with a visible effort, but Malle gave him a grim smile which would have stoked his fury again had he not given vent to it with a mighty roar of rage.

“Really, Dunbar,” she said, with deep condescension, “you must learn to control your temper. It is not a fitting example to your workers.”

Craig ran his hand back through his thick russet hair, then put his arm around Fergus’s shoulders. They both turned their backs on her and began to converse in low voices for some minutes, while Arthur lowered his head to the water and began to quench his thirst, unconcerned with the whole affair.

Malle looked at the sky. It was clouding over again, and soon there would be a torrential downpour. She hoped she could put an end to this dispute peacefully before she had to go home.

Just then, both men turned back towards her.

“MacEwan,” Craig said sarcastically, echoing her disdainful mode of address, “Fergus has been a loyal employee of my father’s for as long as I can remember. I have known him since I was a boy, and if he said he was not about to commit a crime on your land, then he was not.”

“Do you swear that you were not?” she asked Fergus sharply.

Fergus’s expression changed to one of alarm. He was a religious man, as were most people, and he knew that lying under oath was a mortal sin, punishable by eternal damnation. Guilty or innocent, swearing an

oath was a terrifying thing to do. He began to cough loudly, and Craig slapped him on the back, but it did not seem to help much. His face had turned bright red and there were tears streaming down his cheeks.

When he had finished, he stood up straight and held up his hand. “I swear that I didnae want tae poach yer animals or steal yer sheep or cattle or dae onythin’ else Mistress,” Fergus said wheezily. “I am no’ a well man jist at the minute.”

“What do you say to that, MacEwan?” Craig asked triumphantly, with an unpleasant smile.

“Fergus McDowell, look at me,” Malle commanded. The man did not raise his eyes.

“LOOK AT ME!” she roared, bending forward in her saddle as if to get closer to him.

He looked up timidly, and her eyes stared at him so intently that it seemed she would bore a hole in his forehead.

“If you are lying to me under oath, then God will punish you for it.” Her voice was a low warning growl. “You will roast in hell for all eternity. But you may thank Him that it was I who saw you, and not my father or any of his workers, because you would be rotting in my father’s dungeon even as we speak. You may lie to your Laird and lie to me, but you cannot lie to He who made you!”

“He is not lying.” Craig’s deep voice sounded angry. “I trust him.”

Fergus gave Craig a look of deep gratitude.

“Then, Dunbar, you will not mind if I swear too.” She dismounted from Arthur and stood on the bank of the burn directly across from him. Then, raising her hand, she said in a clear, firm voice, “I swear that if I ever catch this man on my land again he will be arrested immediately and thrown into the dungeon. That goes for *any* Dunbar worker who sets foot here.”

For a moment, Craig was dumbfounded. He had expected this little woman to back down and give up, but it appeared that she was made of sterner stuff. After her last riposte, he studied her more closely; she

was not a big woman. In fact, he reckoned that she was almost a foot shorter than he was and so delicately built that she looked like an elf. Her every feature suggested fragility. She had small hands and feet, a heart-shaped face, large eyes, and long dark hair swept up on top of her head showing her swan-like neck. Everything about her looked delicately feminine except for the ferocity of her attitude, which befitted a man of his own stature.

She was still waiting for a reply when he realized suddenly that he was staring at her. He shook his head as if to clear it of unwelcome thoughts, then replied, “I reserve the right to swear too, MacEwan. If one of your people trespasses on my land they will be very, very sorry indeed.”

Malle gave a cynical laugh. “That is just what my father told me about you Dunbars,” she observed, shaking her head. “You will do anything to safeguard your land and wealth, even at the expense of others. You are a crowd of unscrupulous bandits.” Malle knew that she was accusing Craig of the same thing she was doing herself, but she chose to ignore it.

“MacEwan, you have no idea what you are talking about,” he sighed, giving her a pitying smile. “Go home and play with your dollies. I have no more time to waste with you.”

She gave him an exaggerated mocking curtsey, before tossing her last insult across the stream at him. “Swine!” Then she turned Arthur around and headed back home.

Craig stood watching her as she cantered into the distance. His feelings were wavering between anger and admiration. He was not sure whether she was telling the truth, but surely a noble lady like Malle MacEwan would not risk her immortal soul on so trivial a matter!

However, he had known Fergus for years, and had no reason to doubt his word either, and he was not likely to meet the lovely Malle again in the near future, whereas he had to meet and work with Fergus frequently. Nevertheless, she was fascinating, and he thought about her all the way home.

Malle had no such charitable thoughts about Craig. He had been rude, discourteous, and had questioned her honesty. He deserved no respect, and she would not waste her time thinking about him. She tried to ignore the fact that he was a very attractive man; in her eyes his fearsome size made him a bully. Besides, he had a reputation as a brawler and a philanderer, and her disrespect for him knew no bounds.

She went on with her journey, trying to empty her mind of Craig Dunbar to think about the new dress she was having made for her birthday. It was made of beautiful rust-colored velvet, and fitted her like a second skin. Her mother, Margaret MacEwan, had given her an amber brooch and earrings to wear with it, determined that her daughter should look like a princess. Amber always enhanced the color of her eyes, which were the subtle gray-green color of sage leaves.

She had almost managed to put Craig Dunbar to the back of her mind when she walked into the dining room and met her father.

Kenneth MacEwan was not a tall man, only about five feet nine, but what he lacked in height he made up for in personality and intelligence, both of which Malle had inherited from him. He had prematurely white hair, but his sparse beard was still brown, as were his eyebrows. Malle loved him more than anyone else in the world. She loved her mother too, of course, but in a different way. Her mother was her comfort, but her father was her protector and her feelings for him were special.

Now she ran up to him and gave him a kiss, then hugged him tightly. She sighed with relief and rested her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes.

“Malle my lass!” He put his arms around her waist and put her away a little to look at her. “What is wrong?”

“Craig Dunbar,” she growled. “Paw, why did he have to come back from Aberdeen? Why did he not just stay there?”

Kenneth MacEwan frowned. “Where did you meet him, lovie?” he asked, looking troubled. “Was he on our land?”

“No, Paw, but one of his workers was,” she replied angrily. “I nearly stopped him from getting away, but he was too fast for me. I do not know what he was doing on our land but I will wager it was nothing good. He said his horse threw him then jumped the Cut and ran over to our side. Pfft! I can tell nonsense when I hear it.”

“He got away, you say?” Kenneth asked.

She nodded her head. “Yes, Paw, he got away and over the burn before I could catch up with him.” She gave another sigh, this time an angry one. “Then that Craig Dunbar appeared out of nowhere and started to defend him—even though he was on our land trying to do God knows what! Can you believe that wee nyaff denied it? Not only denied it, but swore an oath on it? And that big lump believed him? I swore one too, but I was not believed.”

“Most displeasing,” her father said, shaking his head. He looked at Malle and sighed. “A pity you did not capture him, because we can do nothing unless we catch them in the act, otherwise it is merely their word against ours, and I must admit, part of me would like a Dunbar in the dungeon. However, thank you for trying, Malle. I am very proud of you!”

2

The Story

Kenneth was boiling with rage when he heard about the trespasser, although he would never show it in front of Malle. “If there really are Dunbars coming onto our land”—his tone was thoughtful—“I think it would be prudent to put more guards around the edge of the estate, and perhaps put a fence there. Then no one could jump, wade, or swim across it, unless they were very, *very* determined.”

He poured them both a glass of mulled wine and they sat down to eat dinner, which was venison pie that evening.

Presently, Margaret MacEwan came in. She was an elegant woman with fair hair that had as yet no touch of gray in it, and the same sage-green eyes and small features as Malle. She was two inches taller than her daughter, but then, Malle thought sadly, most people were taller than she was.

Margaret kissed both her husband and daughter then sat down before accepting a glass of wine from Kenneth. “Why are you two looking so gloomy?” she asked at once. “Cheer up!”

Kenneth put a hand over hers on the table. “A potentially serious development on our southern border,” he said grimly, frowning. He briefly outlined what had happened that morning while Malle had been out riding.

Margaret shook her head sadly. “Those people!” she said angrily. “And that son of theirs! It is said that he is a rake, and that many women have fallen for him. He particularly likes young widows, so I have heard.”

Malle, who had been swallowing a mouthful of wine, choked on it and

spat it out all over the pristine white tablecloth. Her eyes were watering and she shook her head furiously.

“Mammy,” she wheezed out at last. “Can we not speak of such things at the dining table please?” She wiped her tears, then her mouth. “I really do not think it is fit talk for the dinner table.” Malle did not want to be reminded of how attractive she found Craig Dunbar.

“Sorry, lovie,” her mother said soothingly. “How is your dress coming along?”

“Oh, Mammy, it’s lovely,” Malle gushed. “It fits like a second skin and it goes so well with the brooch and earrings. You were right—I am going to look like a princess!”

Kenneth watched his wife and daughter fondly as they began to journey into the delightful female world of dresses, ceilidhs, and weddings. He knew that if he slipped out without saying goodbye they would not even notice his absence.

As long as my girls are happy, he thought indulgently. He stood up and kissed them both on the cheek, said goodbye, and left them in gossip land, laughing softly as he went.

He was concerned about Malle, though. She was almost eighteen, and after that age it would be hard to find a suitable husband. There had been no lack of suitors; in fact, there had been many, but she had refused every one, and Malle herself could not give him the reasons why.

She had been thinking about the same subject herself, though. None of the young hopefuls who had beaten a path to her door had made her heart beat faster. The one man who had managed to do so was the one she most disliked: Craig Dunbar.

He was probably a drunk, she told herself. He had probably caught the pox from one of the whores he had slept with. He probably ate like a pig in a trough, and was as thick as two short planks of wood, and Malle could not stand stupid people. One could be uneducated without being an imbecile, but the son of a laird had no excuse; he had the best of everything.

She went to sit in the parlor, where she was reading *Le Livre de La Cité des Dames,* by Christine de Pizan in original French. She was teaching herself that language because she wanted to go to France to see the city of Paris at least once in her life. However, she also had a love of learning about anything and everything under the sun, whether it was sewing or sword fighting or even how to grow rye, and she would study it if it piqued her interest. She enjoyed good conversation and could hold her own in any debate, especially about things most women knew very little about, and she had argued dozens of men to a standstill on many occasions.

Her father came back, sat down, and yawned. He loved to be out in the fresh air, but it tired him out, since, as he admitted himself, he was not getting any younger.

“Do you have time to tell me another story, Paw?” Malle asked, smiling winningly. She knew the answer would be yes, since she could wrap soft-hearted Kenneth around her little finger with no effort at all.

He pretended to grumble a bit, but he loved telling stories as much as Malle liked hearing them. They had a ritual: she would stoke up the fire then pour him a dram of whisky while he sat and sorted out the story in his head by closing his eyes and concentrating. Then she would sit beside him with her head on his shoulder as she had done ever since she was a little girl, and he would begin to speak.

Tonight, the story was about the feud between the MacEwans and the Dunbars, as it usually was. She had listened to all the anecdotes before, but she loved to hear them again and again, even though she could practically recite them word for word. She would never admit, even to herself, that she loved coorying up beside her father and having his arm around her.

“When my father was a boy,” he began, “there was a strip of MacEwan land on the other side of the Cut, but it caused many problems, because the Dunbar sheep would not listen when we told them that they must not graze on that land.”

“Stupid sheep,” Malle murmured, laughing softly.

“So my grandfather put a fence up,” Kenneth said, frowning. “That

worked for perhaps six months, then one day one of his shepherds came to my father and reported that some of Dunbar's sheep were grazing on our land. My father had put up a very strong fence made of the strongest, most mature of our pine wood, so we knew it could not fall down. He walked along a half mile of the fence, almost to the end of our strip of land, then he found a space where the wood had been smashed.

"The force used to do that must have been very strong, but there was no way to prove that the Dunbars had done it, since that part of the Cut was very narrow and could have been reached by anyone." He stopped to sip his wine and smiled at her. "Now you tell me the next bit."

"So Granda put a watch on it," she said, smiling, "and discovered that the shepherds who worked for the Dunbars were bringing their sheep through the hole in dozens because the grass there was nice and lush, but Granda was a cunning and vengeful man, and he could not let this kind of mischief go unpunished. He had three sheep which had foot rot and were kept apart from the rest of the herd and marked for slaughter, so he took them across the water and put them on the Dunbar bank. There they wandered in the damp land around the water's edge and spread the foot rot amongst the Dunbar herd, half of which had to be slaughtered.

"Granda was a ruthless man, Paw," Malle said sadly. "That was cruel."

"To the sheep, maybe," Kenneth agreed. "But they are bred for slaughter, Malle, and that man could not be allowed to get away with that bit of wickedness or much worse would have followed."

"So what happened to the land, Paw?" she asked. She moved to sit at her father's feet where he gently stroked her hair, then he laughed.

"There was a furious exchange of letters for a month before they negotiated a sale of the land to the Dunbars. This was not to say that hostilities had ceased, merely that each side was doing what was practical. From then to this day there has been no actual violence between us. They leave us alone and we leave them alone. It is a pity, because we have much in common and could help each other in many ways, but I doubt Malcolm Dunbar sees it that way, and I am sure his

son does not, judging by what you have told me today."

"He is a very unpleasant character," Malle said angrily, frowning fiercely. "If I were a big strong man I would challenge him, but I am not."

"The traditional way for warring families to make peace was for their sons and daughters to marry." Kenneth laughed mischievously. "Perhaps we should try it!"

"Not even in jest, Paw!" Malle looked up at him, her expression one of complete revulsion. "I would not take him as a gift!"

"So I must not send the proposal I wrote to Malcolm Dunbar?" His voice was still teasing.

"If you ever do that, Paw," she warned, wagging her finger at him, "I will tie you up, throw you in the piggery, and watch them eat you alive!"

Kenneth chuckled. "Then my ghost would come back to haunt you! Do not worry, my lovie." He kissed her cheek. "You will always be safe as long as I am here."

"Tell me another one, Paw," she begged, as her mother came into the room bearing three cups of hot milk on a tray.

"Not more stories, Malle?" She laughed. "You have heard them all a hundred times already!"

Malle laughed and shrugged. "I like them!"

"And with every one you hear, your dislike of the Dunbars becomes worse and worse," Margaret pointed out, frowning. "We should heal this rift—it has been going on long enough. It is very uncomfortable when we go to a ceilidh, then have to stand on one side of a room because the Dunbars are on the other. We should make peace." She looked and sounded depressed.

Suddenly Malle felt very tired. She yawned and stretched then announced her intention to go to bed. She kissed her parents goodnight and went upstairs, but something was nagging at the back of her mind. She disliked Craig Dunbar intensely, and as far as she

could see he had no redeeming features at all, so why was it that her mind kept dwelling on him?

She was glad that they had been on the other side of the river from her, because she was honest enough to admit that if he had put his arms around her she would not have had the strength or inclination to resist him.

~

Back in Dunbar Castle, Craig was thinking similar thoughts about Malle. How could she be so beautiful but so absolutely maddening?

Another thought occurred to him. What if Fergus had trespassed on MacEwan land to run away from someone who was chasing him and not to get his horse back? Fergus McDowell was not poor; he earned a fair wage but he had a family to support. He had a few acres of his own land, though. What if someone wanted that?

He decided not to pursue the matter any further. No one had been harmed.

Suddenly he caught himself thinking about Malle's beautiful angry face. He laid down in his cold bed and closed his eyes, but for a long time sleep would not come, even though he was weary to the bone. He felt an urge to make her his—not in spite of her character, but because of it. He sent the thought away as if it was sinful and tried to sleep.

3

The Body

Malle's daily ride took a rather grotesque turn that morning.

She had decided to go return to the spot where she had found the trespasser so that she could look around and see if there was something there that might have attracted him and tempted him to make the crossing—perhaps one of the deer that roamed the estate.

Besides, it was a beautiful spot. She often wished that she had some way of recording the beautiful scenery and animals in this part of the Highlands, so that she could capture the moment when a stag raised his head while surveying his domain, or the sun going down over the jagged Cairngorm mountains.

She and Arthur meandered down to the Cut to have a drink, but when she reached the bank she recoiled, horrified at what she saw.

There, floating in the middle of the stream, was the corpse of Fergus McDowell.

His tunic was caught on a rock, his sightless dead eyes stared up at the sky, and there was a bright stream of blood leaking from his now useless heart and flowing downstream with the current. Glittering under the water beside him was a large broadsword.

Malle took a few deep breaths to calm herself down, then turned and rode back to castle MacEwan as if the hounds of hell were after her. She scrambled out of the saddle and raced upstairs to her father's study, where she found him poring over his ledgers.

"Malle!" he cried, leaping up from his chair. "Whatever is the matter? You look as if you have seen a ghost!"

She shook her head and gulped in air, trying to recover her breath. “Not a ghost, Paw—a corpse! The corpse of Fergus McDowell, the man I saw yesterday on our land. He is floating right in the middle of the Cut, and he has a hole through his heart.” She burst into tears, but Kenneth gave her only the briefest of hugs for comfort.

He did not waste a moment, even to change out of his kilt into riding clothes. “Come,” he said urgently, grabbing Malle’s hand. “Show me where he is.” He called five of his best guards to go with him and they stormed out of the castle, reaching the Cut ten minutes later. Kenneth dismounted and stared at the body for a while, and Malle wished she could close the staring eyes.

“This was definitely no accident,” he said heavily. “And we know that he is one of Dunbar’s men. We will have to go and see him.”

“See Laird Dunbar?” Malle asked, her eyes wide with disbelief. “You mean to go onto his land?”

Her father nodded slowly, still looking at the corpse. “He came from the Dunbar side, so this affects both of us, and I must go to see him.”

When they approached the river Malle was still not sure about going there.

“Can you not write him a letter?” she asked. “They will not harm a messenger.”

Kenneth shook his head. “This has to be done face to face,” he replied grimly. “You stay here, Malle.”

“Indeed I will not!” she exclaimed, outraged. Before anyone could stop her she had urged Arthur into the water. It came up to his belly, but she was comfortably able to reach the other side, where she waited for the others to join her. Some of the horses jumped and some waded, but they all made it in the end.

Kenneth glowered at her, but he could not help admiring her fighting spirit. “We will talk later, my girl,” he growled.

Malle smiled then followed him. They had not gone two hundred yards when they encountered the Laird Malcolm Dunbar and Laird Craig Dunbar the Younger. Both men scowled at the MacEwan party,

but they could do nothing to hinder them. They were outnumbered, since they were on their own land and had brought no guards with them.

“What are you doing on my land, MacEwan?” Malcolm Dunbar demanded aggressively. “There is no excuse for this! Leave immediately or I will call my guards and my dogs!”

“Did you have to bring your daughter with you, M’laird?” Craig drawled sarcastically. His eyes had been fixed on her since the first moment he saw her with the rest of the party. Indeed, he had not been able to stop thinking about her since their last encounter; even though his mind disliked her, his weak man’s body had other ideas.

“Is she scared to be without her Paw?” he taunted her. He saw her face darken.

“Enough, Craig!” his father barked. “We must sort out this matter. What is your excuse for being on my land, Laird MacEwan?”

“We found one of your workers in the middle of the Cut,” Kenneth answered grimly. “He has been stabbed through the heart.”

“His name is Fergus McDowell,” Malle supplied, looking straight at Craig. “Perhaps you would like to tell your father what happened yesterday, Dunbar.” She had deliberately addressed him in the same disrespectful way as she had the day before, and she saw Laird Malcolm Dunbar open his mouth to speak when Craig silenced him with a shake of his head. Malcolm Dunbar had the same fiery coloring as his son, but that was where the resemblance ended; although he was indignant for Craig’s sake, he was not so hotheaded, and he reluctantly gave his son the chance to speak.

He addressed Malle. “MacEwan.” His deep voice was derisive as he stared across the twenty yards of ground between them. He gave an exaggerated sigh, and addressed his father. “Poor Fergus’s horse jumped over the Cut yesterday and MacEwan caught them and chased them back here. She seemed to think he was up to some mischief, but I think she is making it up.” He gave her a challenging stare.

“And just why would I do that?” she asked scathingly. “Is there not enough trouble between our families without stirring up more?”

He glared at her for a moment then shrugged and spread his hands. “I have no idea,” he replied. “You are a woman. Women are not known for their thinking abilities.”

Malle screamed, not in distress, but in pure rage. She leapt out of the saddle and ran over to Craig, oblivious to the sound of her father and Malcolm Dunbar’s shouts. As she ran up to Craig’s horse, he dismounted.

Malle had not realized Craig’s sheer size. She had to tip her head back to meet his eyes, but she swung her arm around to slap his face; he caught her wrist easily, and stood looking down at her.

His eyes were a deep, dark gray, but they looked almost black with fury.

She glared back at him, and her fists were clenched with the effort of not hitting him again, but she realized that if she did it would only enrage him further, and he was a wall of solid muscle, so she could not hope to hurt him.

Kenneth tried to drag her away, but anger had given her strength, and she resisted with all her might, trying to shake him off, but eventually one of the guards stepped in to help.

“You are making a fool of yourself.” Kenneth’s voice was calm, but stern. “Calm down, Malle, or I will make you ride with one of the guards.”

Presently one of the nearby workers stepped in to speak. There was something about his dark presence that Malle did not like, but she listened to him as she began to calm down.

“M’laird, Mistress,” he said politely, “my name is Alan Bruce, and I may be able tae help solve the mystery for ye. There has been some kind o’ trouble on the estate. Onyway, this could hae been the reason they killed him, but he cannae come back an’ tell us. There is a gang o’ men somewhere on the land keen on stirrin’ things up, agin’ the Laird’s faimly an’ we dinnae knaw why.

“He might hae seen them, or maybe he was even ane o’them, but I doot that. The killin’ might o’ had somethin’ tae dae wi’ that or it

might be a fight amang thersels. From whit I knaw, they hae nae mercy, and if Fergus wis ane o'them—an' I dinnae think he was—an' broke ane o' their rules then they might o' killed him. But Fergus was a hard worker and a good faimly man, an' he has mony friends roon' here an' he will be missed. I dinnae knaw whit his wife an' bairns is gaunnae dae noo."

"We will take care of them," Malcolm Dunbar said firmly. "No one starves on our estate."

Malle was astonished. She had always thought of the Dunbars as merciless criminals, but it seemed that they cared about their workers just as much as the MacEwans did.

Craig was reluctantly impressed by Malle; he had never seen a woman with so much fire and spirit, coupled with so much beauty. She should have looked like a little girl with her small stature and neat features, but the flame inside her was what defined her as a real and passionate woman. He had tried to lie to himself, but he found her deeply attractive, and he was extremely conscious of her nearness as they set off back to the Cut.

Despite her dislike of him, Malle was finding it hard not to look at Craig. He was a handsome, imposing man, and she could see why he had a reputation as a seducer of women. He had defended the indefensible the day before, but Malle had to admit to herself that she might have done the same with one of her own loyal workers. She wondered briefly what it would be like to be held in his powerful arms and have his lips caressing hers, his beard tickling her face.

However, his remark about women's stupidity was utterly inexcusable, and completely washed any good opinion that she might have developed about him in the future. There were some things that simply could not be forgiven.

When they reached the burn Malcolm, Kenneth, Craig, and Malle dismounted and went to the water to look at the body.

"Is that the sword that killed him, do you think?" Malle asked, pointing to the shining shape on the stream bed.

"How could we possibly know that?" Craig asked, as if she were a

simpleton. “We will have to fetch it out and see.” Without another word, he plunged into the water and retrieved the sword, then tossed it out onto the bank. He was soaked from head to the middle of his chest and his shirt was clinging to his body, clearly defining every plane and contour of the muscles of his torso. When he lifted Fergus’s body out of the water, she saw his arm muscles bulge as he strained to heft the dead weight onto the bank.

It was a clear spring morning, the water was freezing, and Craig shivered uncontrollably as he heaved himself out of the stream. One of the guards came and threw a cloak over him

He knelt down to close the staring eyes of the corpse, just as Malle did the same. Their hands touched and she jumped back as if she had been stung.

“Was this not what you wanted, MacEwan?” he asked softly, so that he could not be overheard. “If you are convinced that he was a criminal, then your land and everything on it are safe now. Or maybe you had him killed for revenge!”

She looked at him in absolute disbelief, and was unable to speak for a moment. “Are you quite mad?” she asked, her voice high with indignation. “Why should anyone value the life of livestock over that of men? You are the most…”—she struggled to find the word—“…the most despicable man I ever met!”

He looked down into her raging eyes and felt a shaft of desire shoot through him. Why was it that the angrier she became the more he wanted her?

“Clearly murder sits easily on your conscience, Dunbar,” she growled. “Well I am not at ease with it. The thought of roasting in hell for eternity is not one that appeals to me. For all I know, even you could have killed this man for some twisted reason of your own. Maybe as a punishment or even because you wanted to accuse me for doing so after our argument!”

4

Dunbar Estate

They glared at each other for what seemed like ages, and she saw his fists clench and his eyes darken with rage. “If you were a man I would strike you down for that!”

“Why do you not strike me anyway?” She was taunting him deliberately now, daring him to do his worst. “You don’t have a very high opinion of women anyway!”

He caught her wrists and held her while he scowled at her. She knew she had gone too far, but it was too late to back out now; she could not release herself from his grip so she stared back angrily into his eyes without flinching.

She had no idea what might have happened next if she had not seen a sudden softening of his expression, and he let her go just as both Lairds came to separate them.

I am not going to cry, she said to herself. *I will not give him the satisfaction of seeing me weep.*

Laird Dunbar came up to him and introduced himself. “I heard some of your conversation, Mistress MacEwan,” he informed her, “and I assure you that the Dunbar family had nothing to do with this, but I think I know who did. However, before we jump to conclusions, we must take this body back and examine it. This man is well known to me and my son, and if someone is murdering my workers I want to know who it is. You should too, Laird MacEwan, for they may visit you next. We will go to my castle, if it is acceptable to you.”

Kenneth answered that it was, and they began to ride through the unfamiliar grounds of the Dunbar estate. Malle looked around her

keenly, fascinated at the landscape, which had always been so close to her, yet so far away that it might as well have been on the moon. It was much like their own, but it was much less open, with many more fir and pine trees growing there.

There were sheep dotted around, all Scottish Blackfaces with their distinctive dark legs and faces, and the grass was cropped short where they had passed over it. Lambs had begun to appear in the last month, each one gamboling around with their fellows or happily nursing from their mothers.

They were adorable, Malle thought, thinking of the time when she was a little girl of seven when she had been allowed to hand-rear one of her own until it was six months old. She had felt so important, and so loved as she thought that the little creature depended on her entirely. Looking back now, she knew that the farm hands had done much of the work, but she still felt warm inside when she thought of it.

Presently, she began to pass barley and rye fields, both shining patches of gold in the flat white hazy light, and the bright emerald green of oats. Malle gazed at it all contentedly. If it had not been for the events of the morning it would have been serenely lovely, but finding a dead man in the river was the stuff of nightmares, something that she would dream about for weeks to come, if not forever. She shuddered, but when she let the peace of the day soak into her soul she knew that the tranquility of life would go on after this; it was a bump in the road, that was all.

She sighed and closed her eyes for a brief moment, letting the brisk breeze from the mountains wash over her. Ridge upon ridge they stood, blue-gray and forbidding, like a row of sharp teeth against the sky. Malle knew that when the storm clouds came down they would all but disappear and be nothing but a gray smudge, but even then they would be grimly beautiful.

She had only been to the Lowlands once, but had missed the bleak loveliness of the Highland moors, the black pine and fir trees and the gray rocks protruding from the grass as if the very bones of the earth were showing through. All those same trees grew there too, but they

looked tidy.

Even that part of Scotland was pretty, though. She often wondered if foreign people felt the same passionate love for their home countries as she did for Scotland—the strange, fierce little kingdom that clung tenaciously to the edge of Europe. She could never leave it, because she could simply not imagine living anywhere else, so passionately did she love this fearsome little place.

It was at that moment that she felt someone watching her, and she turned her head sideways to look into Craig's angry eyes. She frowned at him.

"Dunbar?" she asked haughtily.

"MacEwan?" he replied in the same tone.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, tilting her head and looking down her nose at him in a condescending manner.

"It might have something to do with the fact that you have just insinuated that I am a murderer," he growled. "Which I am not!"

"If it is not true, then why are you upset about it?" she asked. "It is probably just the ravings of a stupid woman, after all."

"Aaah, I see!" He laughed. "Well, if it is not true that women are stupid, then why are you so upset about it?" He smirked. "You see, MacEwan, two can play at that game!"

Having neatly turned the tables on her, he spurred his horse on to ride beside his father, and Malle was left looking at the back of his head, silently seething with anger. She was also annoyed with herself, because despite her best efforts to stop it from happening, she was beginning to find Craig Dunbar more and more desirable.

They reached Dunbar Castle a short time later, and Malle was impressed by its size. It was circular, with four rings of walls, one inside the other, ascending to one slim central tower in the middle which was higher than the rest of the castle. From here the Scottish flag, a white diagonal St Andrew's cross on a blue background, fluttered in the breeze, and Malle felt a surge of pride. She would always feel safe where the Saltire flew, and the love of their country

was the only thing that the Dunbars and MacEwans could agree on.

They entered through the main gate, and if the stable hands were surprised to see a young woman amongst all the men, they did not say so.

Craig had been shivering all the way home, and now he needed to wash and change, suddenly aware of how decrepit he must look in Malle's eyes. He caught himself up short at that.

Why do I care what Malle MacEwan thinks? he thought savagely. *She means nothing to me!*

He scrubbed himself down with a piece of pumice and a rough bar of soap that was made at the local monastery, then he dressed in a fresh linen shirt and his second best kilt. He was not dressed for a ceilidh, but he looked a great deal better than he had before. He refused to admit to himself that he wanted to impress Malle, even though she was the only woman he had ever met who attracted him in so many different ways.

He looked at his beard and decided that it needed a trim, but there was no time now, so he contented himself with running a wooden comb through his hair before going downstairs.

When she saw him, Malle wanted to stare at him for as long as she could, for he was magnificent. She could see that he was not dressed up, but he looked clean and comfortable, with every beautiful line of his body enhanced by his crisp white shirt that also showed just a hint of rust-colored chest hair.

Malle realized she was staring and abruptly looked away, blushing. If Craig noticed, he made no sign of it. He held out a glass of wine to her, his eyebrows raised questioningly, and she took it gratefully, mumbling her thanks.

Laird Dunbar sat everyone down at the dining room table, having sent all but two of the guards away. His eyes, as dark gray as Craig's, looked around the table.

"Laird MacEwan," he began, "it has been some time since your family and mine saw eye to eye, but now we have a problem here that affects

both of us. Fergus had been a loyal worker of mine for many years, as had his father before him, but lately he seemed to change." He shook his head, baffled.

"At first we thought it was you who was causing trouble on our estate," Craig put in, "but we found some evidence that points to outsiders. There is a cave near the edge of the other boundary of the estate where we found clothes, blankets, cooking materials, and a few other basics for living very simply. It looks as if three people were staying there, but there may be others we do not know about." He paused for a moment. "Our families are not friendly, and have not been for a very long time. However, even though I am not yet the Laird proper, I thought this might be a first step to heal the breach between us. In this situation, what affects us affects you, and what affects you affects us."

Kenneth MacEwan looked at Craig with astonishment in his eyes. "You mean—end our feud?"

"I did not say that," he replied, shaking his head. "I meant a cautious truce."

The MacEwans finished their wine and stood up, then Craig bowed to Malle in farewell. He did not kiss her hand, but she curtsied to him anyway.

As she turned away, a strand of hair escaped from the knot on top of her head and dropped down her back, and Craig could see that it reached down to her waist. He loved long hair, and the longer the better. He only just stopped himself from reaching out to touch it.

Malle could feel his eyes on her back, but she did not turn around.

As they stood at the main entrance to the castle watching them ride away, Malcolm smiled. "Beautiful girl," he remarked.

"Then *you* get to know her, Father," Craig said grimly.

~

They rode back faster and more cautiously, and both of them scanned the countryside around them continuously to see if there were any

signs of suspicious activity of any sort. Once across the river they felt a little safer, and Malle felt free to speak.

“Have you heard about these people, Paw?” she asked, troubled. “I mean—what do they really want?”

“I have,” he replied. His face was grim, and he looked uncomfortable. “I think it has something to do with the feud between our families, but I do not know exactly what, and I had no idea they were so close. It is very worrying.”

~

That evening at bedtime Malle stood at her window staring down at the estate below her. Their land was relatively flat and treeless for the most part, so on a moonlit night she could often see for miles. However, tonight there was only starlight, and the darkness down below was almost total.

She fancied that she could see shapes like dark insects creeping under the shadows of the trees—could it be the troublemakers coming to pay a visit? She thought about going out to search, but then admitted to herself that she might really be hoping that Craig was one of them. She had no need to go out looking anyway. Even if there were bandits outside, there were twenty guards with swords and pikes between them, so she had no reason to worry. She was being fanciful. Wasn’t she?

She had given up all hope of trying not to think about Craig today. Despite her dislike of him, she was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. When he had come downstairs and she saw him in his kilt and white shirt with the triangle of red hair at his throat, his hair and beard the color of autumn leaves glinting in the daylight, she had felt herself go weak at the knees. How could a man who was the person she disliked most in the whole world be the most attractive?

She drank a cup of Valerian tea and crushed lavender leaves on her pillow, then fell asleep straight away, but her last thought before sleep claimed her was of Craig.

5

The Secret Room

When she woke the next morning Malle looked out the window and groaned. It was not just raining, it was coming down so hard that nothing was visible for more than twenty yards. There would be no riding, walking, or picnicking today. It was on days like this that Malle loved to bury herself in a book, but there was nothing in the library that took her fancy that day, and she did not want to sit with her mother; all she ever talked about was who was getting married, what her dress was like, and when was it going to be Malle's turn?

Although she loved her mother dearly, the thought of listening to that drivel all day made her feel quite sick. Malle's agile mind needed constant stimulation, and she had recently discovered one part of the castle that she was certain no one else knew about.

She had found it a few months previously when she was browsing for something to read. Having pulled out a perfectly ordinary looking book, she was astounded when all of a sudden a whole section of the bookcase swiveled out, almost knocking her down. She had a brief, tantalizing glimpse of an impenetrably dark space, but unfortunately her mother had come in, and she had not had a proper chance to explore it since. Not until now.

Now she pulled the book out and the door opened as it had before. She had a candelabra with six candles to illuminate her way, so she had more than enough light to see by. The walls of the passage were made of big blocks of sandstone, and the air was stuffy and smelled musty, with cobwebs decorating the corners of the roof and brushing against Malle's face. About ten yards past the entrance she saw a stout wooden door on her left, and wondered what was inside. She was half

expecting to see a pile of skeletons, but the only things in the room were shelves and shelves of rolled parchment. Little did Malle know then that she had stumbled on a treasure trove.

She pulled out a few documents from the shelves randomly then sat on the floor with her back against the wall to read them. They were all dated, so she had a vague idea of the generation she was dealing with. She decided to try to put them into some sort of order when she had time, and for once she was hoping that the rain would bucket down for days.

She picked up a document dated about fifty years before and began to read. The letter was obviously the answer to a man who had written to his father complaining about the price of wool falling so much that soon he would be bankrupt, and Malle quickly put that one down.

Perhaps I should keep it, she thought, *in case I cannot sleep and run out of Valerian tea.* She chuckled at the thought.

She went through many more such letters before she came to something a bit more interesting.

There were many letters from different members of the family, all addressed to Laird Hugh MacEwan, Malle's great-great grandfather, and they all had one thing in common: the Dunbars, who were the wealthiest family in the area at that time and thought they could lord it over everyone else.

They treated their neighbors with great disrespect, grazing animals on their land and taking fields beyond their boundaries, but they were too powerful to oppose. The MacEwans were protected to a certain extent by the fact that a stream ran on the border between their two estates, and they had friendly relations with all of their neighbors, even the Dunbars, although they kept a watchful eye on them. Other lairds with smaller estates looked to the MacEwans for support, but without fomenting war, little could be done.

She went on until she found a big leather-bound book with hundreds of pages in it. The volume was so old that their edges had been eaten into tatters by moths. *Hmmm…* she thought, *this may be the start of my journey*.

It was the journal of a woman called Saundra MacEwan, who, judging by the date, was Malle's great-great-great grandmother. She dug a little deeper and found another. It was the diary of Bettina Munro, Saundra's sister. Malle decided to keep both of these and take them upstairs with her; she had a feeling that they would be fascinating enough to keep her going until bedtime at least.

Then she began to put the rest of the correspondence in the order of their dates, so that she could put her hand on them more easily the next day, and after that she put the two journals in her room and went for lunch. When she had finished she stood by the window contemplating the depressing prospect of hours of more rain, so she fetched some spiced ale and went to her bedroom. It was freezing, and she got into bed, drew the covers under her chin, and made a lectern for her book by bending her knees upward.

She opened Saundra's diary and noticed one peculiarity at once. She spoke to it as though it were a person. Malle laughed; she must have been quite a character! For the first few pages the only entries were complaints about some of the other lairds' wives. Then there were accounts of ceilidhs, christenings, weddings, and in quite a few of these she mentioned her granddaughter Isobell, who was obviously her favorite, judging by the indulgent way she talked about her. She seemed to be able to do no wrong.

Just before Easter, when everyone was in the doleful period of Lent, Isobell had gone out to pick her grandmother a bunch of spring and hothouse flowers to mark her birthday. They could not celebrate openly, since the eating and drinking of rich foods was prohibited, as was the consumption of wine and whisky; most ordinary people could not afford those anyway. However, all celebration was frowned upon during this period which was meant to be cleansing for the soul and body before the glorious feast of Easter. Saundra had read the letter and Malle could practically hear her chuckling.

She paged on through a few more days of ordinary happenings until she came to a period of great excitement.

It is Isobell's first Ceilidh tonight, Dear Journal! Her friend Elisaid is celebrating her sixteenth birthday and Isobell has been invited. She is in the

first flower of womanhood—her blue eyes are shining like the sky on a sunny day, there are roses in her lovely cheeks, and her hair is flowing like a river of gold. She wears no jewelry, but then she needs none. Indeed, she looks like a princess in her velvet dress, which is the color of pale coral. The neckline gives just a hint of the delights underneath which will become more generous as she matures. You understand what I mean, do you not, Dear Journal? Some young laird is going to be a very fortunate man soon!

Malle laughed at this, remembering her first celebration. She had been bored witless, and had excused herself by pleading a bad headache, then disappeared upstairs to go to sleep. However, her best friend Allie had come to see her and they had spent the rest of the night giggling and gossiping. They had drunk a little too much wine and became very tipsy, then fell asleep. They were only found in the morning, then both of them were confined in their respective castles for a month as punishment.

She went back to the diary. At the beginning of May, the tone changed, and it became one of deep disapproval.

It seemed that a handsome young laird had seen Isobell and had become instantly smitten. She had taken one look at him and fallen in love at first sight. They danced with each other for the rest of the evening and arranged to meet for a ride along the Cut the next day. That day he had asked Isobell to marry him and she had accepted without hesitation.

Malle read through a torrent of abuse hurled at the poor young man, but after that Saundra finished her entries for the day and it was another week before either of them was mentioned again. In between there was nothing but the usual banalities of life, and she skipped past them to the interesting parts because she was greedy for news of Isobell and her swain.

They were written with heavy strokes of the quill which almost pierced the parchment in some places, and there were tiny sprays of ink around some of the letters where it had splashed onto the page with the quill's pressure. She had even forgotten to address the diary.

May God have mercy on her soul! That silly young wench Isobell says she

is still determined to marry the boy whom she apparently fell in love with at first sight. Her parents have tried to find out who it is, but she will not tell them, but they think it is a childish infatuation that will die naturally, and they are not too worried. I am not so sure, having almost made the same mistake myself. I talked to my daughter-in-law about it but she says that Isobell is utterly determined. I am shocked beyond measure. Nothing like this has ever happened in our family before. I will be going to have a stern word with Isobell tomorrow and see if I can get her to reveal the identity of this reprobate! God help us all!

Malle wondered what the young lovers would do. They were not free agents; no one of nobility was.

She decided to go downstairs and take a look at some of the other letters; the second diary could wait until later. She had to find out the circumstances that had led to the feud between the MacEwans and the Dunbars. If she could find out exactly what had happened, then perhaps they could put an end to it.

It was easier to find the letters that she was looking for now that she had put them in order, and she laid her hands on the ones between Isobell and Donnan, took them up to her room, then stood by the window looking down on the green landscape, peaceful now in the gloaming, when night and day were evenly balanced. Could there be men among the trees who wanted to do them harm? She shuddered, then the unbidden thought came to her that Craig would protect her. But why should he? He was not her friend.

She sighed and shook her head to banish the unwelcome thoughts, then she began to read the first letter written to Isobell from Donnan.

My Isobell,

Nothing prepared me for the shock of seeing you for the very first time, and I knew at that moment we were meant to be together forever. After our first kiss I knew I had found the love of my life, but I also knew that our families would try to keep us apart, but they will not succeed. I am determined about this. We must be very clever, my darling. If you accept me, we can be married in secret. I have a very good friend, Donal, who studied at the same seminary as my brother Jamie. He will marry us

quickly if we ask him, and I can rely on him to be discreet.

So, my love, will you marry me? I will be the happiest man in the world if you do.

Your loving Donnan

Malle picked up the next letter, which was the reply. Isobell had obviously asked Donnan to give this one back to her so that she could keep them together, no doubt as souvenirs of the happiness she had expected to share with her darling Donnan forever. Knowing what had happened made Malle so sad that she almost shed tears while she read it. Understanding the relationship between the two families, she was astonished to see that Isobell and Donnan had married, and thought that it was an act of great bravery.

Oh, my darling, darling Donnan,

You have no idea how happy you have made me! Please tell me the time and the place and I will be there!

Your adoring Isobell

Malle smiled and sighed, wishing she could be so happy.

6

More Letters

Malle paged through the entries in the diary until she found one that was dated six weeks later. Isobell seemed to be floating on a cloud of joy.

Donnan and I were married secretly under the spreading branches of the only oak tree on the Dunbar estate! It had shed its summer finery for the winter, but we did not care. We were both wearing fur cloaks and gloves against the cold, and our witnesses were my friend Elisaid and Donnan's brother Jamie, and our priest was Donal, Jamie's friend.

The ceremony was, of necessity, short, as were both sets of vows, because it was very, very cold. I will never forget the words he said:

"Isobell, you are the love of my life. Will you be my wife and the mother of my children?" he asked, smiling at me.

"I will, Donnan. And will you be my husband and protector and the father of my children?"

"I will." He smiled, and slipped the ring on my finger. Then we were husband and wife. We have decided to call the oak tree "The Wedding Tree" from now on.

We consummated our marriage in a tiny cottage that had once belonged to a tenant farmer but is now empty. Elisaid made it cozy and pretty for us. Donnan and I made love for the first time. It was glorious, and nothing like I imagined. I was very scared at first, but Donnan, my wonderful husband, helped me through my fear. Now I am truly Donnan's wife, and we both wanted to be sure of that before we told our parents. It is a good thing we did, because they were not pleased at all!

Malle went on to read about the reception they got from both sets of parents. They were most unhappy that the two had married, because it had not been planned by them. Furthermore, neither Isobell nor Donnan had sought their consent.

However, when Isobell moved into Dunbar Castle with her husband they could see how happy the young couple was, and things became less tense, as Isobell wrote in frequent diary entries.

Then one morning six months after their marriage, Isobell was found dead on the floor of their bedroom; there were no marks on her and nothing to suggest she had been bludgeoned or stabbed to death.

Donnan, after spending a few silent minutes with his head bowed, showed no apparent reaction, as she saw in Aunt Saundra's diary entry the day after Isobell's death:

My heart is broken. My own dear granddaughter Isobell was found dead this morning on the floor of her bedroom and no one knows what caused it, but her callous husband has not shed a tear.

From the moment of Isobell's death, relations between the MacEwan and Dunbar families went downhill. The MacEwans suspected the Dunbars of murdering Isobell, and in a few years mutual wariness had given way to outright hostility.

Malle felt so sad after reading about the ill-fated lovers that she went to see her mother to talk about it downstairs in the parlor. However, she was dozing in an armchair by the fire, and she was reluctant to wake her; she looked so peaceful.

As Malle looked at Margaret, she felt a deep upwelling of tender love. Margaret was over forty now but she still looked like a woman in her early thirties. Malle thought her remarkable in every way. She could sew, draw likenesses in charcoal, ride like a man, and sing like...well, Malle had no comparison. No one had a voice like her mother, and no one had a mother like Malle's.

Her love for her mother and father may have had different qualities, but they were both equally strong.

Malle had brought Isobell's diaries with her. They dealt with the minutiae of daily life, the things they laughed at, the things that worried them, and the things that annoyed each one about the other. There was nothing remarkable about them at all, and it came to her that this really was love—accepting each other for who they were, not living in constant worship of each other. It gave her a little glimpse of what marriage was really like and it reassured her that she would not have to be perfect, because she never could be.

When she thought about the two of them lying in bed at night chatting about the day it made her smile, and she wondered what it must be like to wake up with a man in her bed. She knew that she should not, but she kept thinking about Craig, and the brief second of kindness and concern in his eyes. Then she shook the thought out of her head. He had been deceptively gentle when they were all talking, but as soon as they had finished he had gone back to his old self—grim, cynical, and threatening.

Presently Margaret sat up, rubbed her eyes, and yawned. She smiled at her daughter. "What do you have there?" she asked.

Margaret read it, and it had much the same effect on her as it had on Malle. Tears trickled down her face as she read about Donnan's sadness.

"I heard that Donnan had asked to join him as a lay brother in the Monastery of St Kentigern. Donnan wrote to his brothers and his father for a while but after a few years he died. Some say of a broken heart although nobody really knows for sure."

"Paw never talks about this story, Mammy," Malle said thoughtfully. "It seems that because no one ever found out the cause of Isobell's death, things became violent."

"I have heard something about it," Margaret answered, "but I have not thought about it for a long time. The feud now is not open warfare—the fact that Laird Dunbar would talk to you at all is proof of that, but frankly I was amazed that he would even have you on his land. But I had heard that he was a much more reasonable man than many of his predecessors." She thought for a moment, then decided to tell her more.

“What I heard was this: After Donnan died, and because Jamie had become a monk, the Lairdship passed to the youngest son, Colin, on his father’s death. Colin had no wish to be a laird at all. He was more interested in flirting with the local ladies, especially the married ones, and this gave him a bad reputation among the local nobility, and the Dunbars were no exception. As you can imagine, it gave them an excuse to dislike him even more, and to deepen the rift between the two families. However, he did his duty, got married, and had a son.

“Colin was a wastrel and a seducer, and he was fond of his whisky, so when he suddenly found himself under attack from the Dunbars he was rather unprepared. It was his wife Anabella who rallied the troops and brought all their defenses to bear against the Dunbars.

“However, there were many families whose loyalties were split. It was devastating—the most violent time in the history of the two families. And many innocent people were killed, most of them among the common people. The tragedy is that although the violence eventually stopped the feud carried on, and does to this day.” She sighed and passed a hand over her eyes. “Malle—I hate it!” She was angry.

“I hate the whole affair and the stupidity of it. I do not think Isobell was murdered, but I think she died naturally of some condition no one knew about, perhaps her heart. Maybe we can explore further and see if a physician monk examined her corpse. There are many such educated men at the big monasteries.” Then something struck her. “Where did you find those letters, Malle? I thought I knew where all our documents are kept.”

Malle sighed and rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. “I will tell you soon, Mammy, but let me sleep on these things first. I am very tired.”

“Tell me tomorrow,” Margaret said sternly. “I am exhausted too. I need you to trust me, Malle. Now goodnight, love.” She put her arms around her daughter and embraced her tightly. “We must find a good husband for you soon, darling. It is past time.”

“I am in no rush, Mammy,” she answered, yawning. “And there are not too many young suitors hammering at the gates!”

“Not yet!” Margaret released her, laughing. “You are seventeen, young

lady, and beautiful. It is time we had a ceilidh for you so you can meet all the young lairds—but this time you must not sneak upstairs away from your guests!"

Malle sighed and smiled as they began walking towards their bedrooms. "Mammy, I do not want to be married. To wake up in bed next to some great hairy man? No, not yet. Maybe not ever."

Margaret put an arm around her shoulders. "You will not be saying that when you meet the right big hairy man, Malle. He will completely change your mind, I promise."

Craig Dunbar crossed Malle's mind fleetingly, but she chased him away.

7

Isobell's Grave

The next morning Malle decided to use her daily ride to visit the cemetery where both the Dunbar and MacEwan clans were buried to visit Isobell's grave and pay her respects. However, Margaret had other ideas. When her husband had left the breakfast table, and Malle stood up to do likewise, Margaret caught her arm.

"I would like to know where you got those documents," she demanded.

"I found them in a secret place, Mammy," Malle said resignedly. She had long since given up trying to keep anything from her mother. Malle looked up into her mother's green eyes, which had now darkened with determination. "There are many more in there, and it will take a long time to go through them."

If Malle thought that this would deter Margaret, she was sadly mistaken; in fact, it did the opposite.

"Then the sooner we get started the better," Margaret said grimly. Malle said nothing for a moment, so Margaret waited and drummed her fingers on the table. Malle sighed inwardly. She had wanted to keep the storeroom a private place where she could be alone and no one could find her, but her mother did not give up easily.

"Very well, Mammy," she said in a defeated tone, and led Margaret reluctantly to the library, where she pulled out the book and led the way into the hidden room behind the bookcase.

Margaret gasped when she saw it. "This is a treasure trove, Malle!" she exclaimed.

"It is," Malle agreed. "I have tried to put everything in some kind of

order but it needs a different kind of mind from mine to do it!"

Margaret looked at her fondly. "Not you," she laughed. "Leave it to me, and we will see if we can piece some more of our family history together. I would love to find out about all of it!" She gave Malle's backside a playful pat. "Go riding and do not pass into Dunbar land. I do not care what the Laird says or how well intentioned he may be, but we are only safe if we stay on our side of the Cut."

Malle nodded and turned away.

"Promise me, Malle," Margaret insisted, her voice stern and commanding. Malle knew that disobeying her mother when she spoke in that tone was not a good idea!

"I promise, Mammy," she replied, smiling. "Don't worry about me." She turned away and left, but Margaret MacEwan watched her as she walked out.

I am her mother, she thought. *It is my duty to worry.*

From her window, she watched Malle and Arthur trot away in the direction of the graveyard. Since it was shared by the whole village of Drumnadour, it was in neutral territory, so Malle was as safe there as it was possible to be.

Malle had taken some carnations from the castle hothouses with the intention of putting them on Isobell's grave. The cemetery was ancient —some of the graves were four hundred years old—but fortunately both the Dunbars and the MacEwans had a mausoleum of their own. She wondered which one Isobell would be interred in, since she had been born a MacEwan but had become a Dunbar by marriage. Which family had claimed her? She went into her own family's first, and searched amongst all the coffins in the narrow niches where they rested. There was no Isobell Maria MacEwan Dunbar anywhere. She found her mother, her great-aunt, her aunt, and her grandmother and grandfather, but no Isobell rested there.

She was not sure the Dunbar mausoleum would be accessible to her but she tried the door anyway, and to her surprise it opened. She stepped tentatively into the dark interior, feeling a sense of creeping dread as she imagined the hostile spirits of all the Dunbars around

her. Again, she crept around the coffins, but could find nothing. She frowned in puzzlement. Surely Isobell could not be buried amongst the graves of the villagers? That would be a serious insult indeed!

She did find something, however. There was a book of condolences on a lectern inside the building, and when she opened it and paged through it she came to a page that was wholly dedicated to Isobell. It had been written by Donnan and obviously been done in anger.

My beloved Isobell, you were the center of my life, even though we had such a short time together to enjoy our love, and I can never forgive my family for separating us in death. But at least my brother made sure that you are resting under the oak tree where we were married, and for that I will always love him. Soon, we will be together again in heaven, and no one will ever be able to part us again. I have a feeling it will be soon, my treasure, because I cannot live without you. I will count every moment till we meet again. Goodbye, my Isobell, my beloved.

Malle was shocked. So that was the answer! Isobell was denied a place with both the MacEwans *and* the Dunbars, but Jamie had found somewhere even more special to both of them. Malle knew vaguely where the tree was, since it was a famous landmark in the area, but she was not completely certain. There were several hand-drawn maps of the area amongst the documents she had looked through, and she knew that it was not far away, but to see it she would have to cross the Cut onto Dunbar land. She wavered for a moment, then made up her mind. She would do it, but her mother must never know.

~

Craig had decided that it was time to take a day off that day. He had been helping some of his tenants with the sheep shearing for the last week and had been taking rather a lot out of himself. He had been doing much thinking about Malle MacEwan too and wondering why she disturbed him so much.

He was not the kind of man who had much trouble with women, since usually they were only too willing to fall at his feet. Malle was an exception to that rule. Not only did she refuse to fall at his feet, but he

thought there was a reasonable possibility that she would stomp on his toes given half a chance. He had no time for her. He told himself that over and over again but the message was not being received by his heart, only his head.

It was a cloudy but otherwise pleasant morning, and he decided to take himself along to the place he loved best on the whole of his father's extensive estate: the oak tree. It was said that the tree was five hundred years old, but no one knew if that was truth or legend. It was certainly a very old and unusual tree, its branches gnarled and twisted, its bark gray, chipping, and peeling in the harsh Highland climate.

Usually the only trees which thrived in the unforgiving weather were pines, spruces, and firs, but he loved to sit underneath the old oak, lean his head back on the trunk, think and daydream, plan and make pictures in the air. If anyone had seen him like this they would have been astonished, and his reputation as a big tough man would have been ruined.

The fact that there was a gravestone next to him had never bothered him. Isobell Dunbar, who had been born a MacEwan, was more of a legend than an ancestor, and since she and her husband Donnan never had any children, they were not blood kin.

He came in sight of the big tree, yawning, then stopped dead. Underneath the spreading branches of the oak was Malle MacEwan, and she was crying bitterly. He stood still for a fraction of a second, wondering what to do, then he ducked behind a fir tree to watch her. The fact that she was on his family's land had not occurred to him at all, because suddenly his mind was wholly occupied by the woman in front of him, and all he wanted to do at that moment was to be near her.

~

Malle had found the tree quite easily, and she dismounted to let Arthur crop the grass for a while. She made her way up to the oak very slowly, and saw that the grave was clearly marked with a rectangular shaped iron fence about a foot high which was rusted with

age and weather. The graves in the crypts were not open to the weather and were in immaculate condition, but Isobell's was covered in weeds and fallen leaves, most of them rotten. Malle doubted anyone had visited it in years and it was a sad, sad sight.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she pulled up wild plants of all descriptions, cleared away oak leaves and, since she had no other tools, she swept the earth smooth with her hands.

She sat back to look at the gravestone. It was made of what had been polished granite, but it had been overgrown by moss and lichen then scoured by years of wind and salt water from the Irish Sea, which was only a mile or so away.

The inscription on it had been almost completely worn away, but she scraped away the plant life and read: *Isobell Maria MacEwan Dunbar, Beloved Wife of Donnan. Rest in Peace, My Angel, Until We Meet Again in Heaven.*

They could have spent a long and happy life together if Isobell had lived longer; perhaps there would have been children, and Donnan would never have gone to live in a monastery. They were such a tragic couple; everything that could have gone wrong for them had gone wrong—the worst thing of all was that Isobell's death had never been explained.

Malle caressed the stone with her fingertips then read the words aloud in a low murmur. She wished she had brought a vase with her, since she had nothing to put the flowers in. She laid them on the grave and said a silent prayer for the repose of Isobell's soul, and that of her grieving husband, then she smiled through her tears. They were together now.

"They say she committed suicide," said a deep voice from behind Malle. She jumped in fright then rose to her feet, twisting around to face him in one fluid movement. The dagger she always carried with her seemed to leap into her hand and she pointed it at him, scowling with rage.

Craig put his hands up, but he was not afraid. He did not even pretend to be. He could have disarmed her in the time it had taken her to rise

to her feet, but he admired her spirit too much to disillusion her. Her ability in hand-to-hand combat would be feeble; she was a woman, and that was not her fault, but she really ought not to be challenging men twice her size, he thought. He stepped fully into her line of sight and she followed him all the way, turning as he turned.

“Don’t tell me I am on your land, Dunbar,” she said, her voice gritty and threatening. “I am just leaving, if you will allow me. This is our relative’s grave. I had heard her and Donnan’s story and I wanted to come and see her; this is her grave, which unfortunately is on your land. I apologize for trespassing.”

He frowned. “She is no relative of mine; she is not blood of my blood. But you may go, MacEwan. I cannot be bothered with you; I have better things to fritter away my time on.” His tone was patronizing and dismissive, and suddenly Malle lost all control of her reason. He was over six feet tall, weighed far more than she did, and could have knocked her over with one finger.

She gave a roar of rage and lunged at him with the dagger, but before it struck him, her wrist was caught in a grip of iron, and Craig’s steely gray eyes were fixed on her with a penetrating hostile glare. She tried to wrest her arm free, but he was too strong.

Before, Craig had been merely amusing himself and testing how far he could push her, but now it appeared that he had gone too far. This was not a game for her; it was deadly serious, and now it had become serious for him too.

He twisted the dagger out of her hand, but she would not give up trying to pull away, and knowing that she was now defenseless, she became as aggressive as a cornered bear. It did not even cross her mind to ask him to let her go, and for a moment they were both held captive by their stubbornness; neither would back down first.

Then with a growl, he brought his lips down on hers in a hard, punishing kiss.

8

Giving In

Malle did not even try to put up a fight after that. Craig was enraged and determined to have his way, and he had backed her up against the tree trunk and was pinning her there with his weight. As well as that, she realized that she did not want to resist him. His lips, which had been hard and brutal at the beginning, were now caressing hers with a gentle pressure, and she let out an involuntary moan of pleasure.

She could not believe this feeling. It was as though something had ignited a flame inside her, and she felt herself becoming breathless with passion. She could not control herself.

It was not her first kiss; she had been kissed many times before, but not like this. He thrust his hands into her hair and ran the silky strands through his fingers, and without even realizing, Malle wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him closer. The rasp of his beard against her face was so pleasurable that she ran her hands over it and heard herself moaning again. What was happening to her?

But that beard reminded her that he was very much a man. A Dunbar man. Her enemy. She tried to push him away and of course it was useless, but eventually he let her go.

They stood scowling at each other, both breathless and furious. Craig was not only angry with Malle, but with himself. She was trespassing, but that was not what had maddened him; what had really enraged him was her defiance. He disliked and desired her at the same time, and he felt helpless to reconcile these emotions.

His body wanted her quite desperately, but she obviously did not feel the same, and this baffled him. How could a tiny woman like this

stand up to a man ten inches taller than she and not be afraid? He was used to putting the fear of God into men who were much bigger in size and strength than this little woman. However, he had seen not one sign of fear in her eyes as she lunged at him, and there had been no hesitation in her movements. She was as wild as a she-cat defending her kittens.

Malle knew she should be furious—she *was* furious—but not only with Craig. She was angry with herself for enjoying the kiss so much.

If he expected her to calm down, he was sorely disappointed. He could almost see the sparks flying from her eyes.

“So that is how the men in your family treat their women,” she said scathingly. She felt as though he could read her thoughts, and was feeling embarrassed and vulnerable, and as always at times like these, she lashed out.

She raked him up and down with a withering stare. “I am sorry I set foot on your land, but rest assured it will never happen again. If I see you on neutral ground, do not speak to me, do not look at me, in fact...do not acknowledge me in any way, and I will do you the same courtesy.”

His anger was now rising to meet her own. “Have a care, MacEwan!” he said angrily. “You are still on my land and I would be quite within my rights to arrest and imprison you. My family is as dear to me as yours is to you, and do not forget it. If you carry on in this vein I will not be responsible for my actions, so watch your mouth!”

He began to walk away but Malle was not ready to be quiet yet. “No wonder Isobell died in your family’s care. The Dunbars are obviously used to taking just what they want!”

Craig stopped in his tracks and bunched his hands into fists. “Not another word,” he growled. He was at the limit of his self control, and he knew that one more sound from her would be one too many. He would never strike a woman, but he was not above throwing one in the dungeon.

Fortunately, Malle had said all she wanted to, and turned away from him. The last she saw of him was his broad back as he rode away in

the direction of his castle.

The last few moments had been a wrenching emotional ordeal for Malle. She tried to contain herself until he was out of sight, then she collapsed on the ground and started to sob her heart out. Being with Craig, held against the solid warmth of his body, having his powerful arms around her, his firm lips moving gently on hers, had been the most blissful moment of her whole life, and yet she had driven him away. How she wished he were not the enemy!

She was unaware that tears were trickling down her face until she saw a damp spot on her dress, then she hastily wiped away the moisture from her cheeks.

She sat for a long time looking at the grave before she thought about standing up, intending to say a last prayer and go home, but to her surprise, there was a priest standing behind her. He was an elderly man; tall, bent, and wrinkled, with faded blue eyes, but he had the kindest face she had ever seen, and benevolence radiated from him as he smiled at her. Malle hoped he had not witnessed the argument between herself and Craig, and their subsequent kiss; as a celibate man, it might have shocked him.

“Good morning, my dear,” he greeted her, and she noted that he had quite a fine strong voice for a man who looked to be in his seventies. “Let me help you up.”

Malle could have managed quite well on her own, but she allowed him to grasp her wrist and help her, realizing for the first time that it was tender from Craig’s grasp, and slightly bruised. She felt a surge of anger. Why had she even thought that she might like him?

“I am Father John Baxter,” the priest said softly. “Why are you looking at this grave? It is a long way from the others.”

“I am Malle MacEwan, and Isobell MacEwan was my ancestor, so I was curious,” she replied. “I had heard about her and Donnan’s love story, and I have read some pieces of their diaries. They were passionately in love, and what happened to Isobell was such a tragedy.”

Father Baxter nodded. “Indeed, and a mystery,” he sighed. “Come to

the church. I have priests' diaries going back centuries. Maybe they could shed some light on the matter, if we add it to what you have uncovered already."

"I am trespassing on MacEwan land, Father," she pointed out. "So I must go back."

Father John shook his head emphatically. "In the church you are on God's land, not the Dunbars' or anyone else's," he replied. "That is why you can take sanctuary here and no one can touch you."

Malle sighed with relief.

"And we can eat," he suggested. "Plain fare, but it will sustain you."

"Thank you, Father. I am rather hungry," she admitted. They chatted about all the affairs of the church, her life at the castle, and the recent problems on the border.

When they got to the Church of St Laurence the Martyr, they went inside to Father John's humble quarters, which was no more than a room with two chairs, a table, and a narrow bed with a fire for cooking and heating. The only decoration was a crucifix on the wall above his bed, and the entire place would not have filled the dress cupboard in Malle's bedroom.

There were a few shelves with bread, cheese, milk, and some earthenware dishes which probably contained barley and oats, a flagon of ale, and a few apples. Malle had seen a goat and a few chickens outside with a small kitchen garden, so Father John was self sufficient in this beautiful place. She envied him the solitary simplicity of his life. He put a bannock, a slice of cheese, and a mug of ale in front of her, then looked at her frankly.

"You said that you wanted to find out more about the Dunbars?" he asked.

"Isobell and Donan," she replied, nodding. "Because their story seems to have much to do with the feud that is going on between our families today. For a while, during Isobell's short life, it seemed to cool down a bit, but now it has flared up again and I have no idea why. We found a man's body floating in the Cut the other day. He had

been stabbed through the heart, but no one has any idea why, or who could have done it. He was a common working man with no valuables, so it cannot have been robbery." She looked up at him and shrugged. "I know about it," Father John said slowly. "Laird Dunbar came here after the death with the body to have it blessed and anointed. He was most upset and so was his son, Craig. I have never seen either of them that way before. His gentle blue eyes looked sad as he remembered.

"Hmm," Malle said shortly. "I had no idea Craig Dunbar had any feelings."

Father John frowned. "Indeed he does, Malle. He is a fine young man."

"You are a man of God, Father, so I will take your word for it." Her tone was bitter.

He stared at her for a moment and said nothing, although he was wondering what had made her so cynical.

"We buried him yesterday," he sighed. "His wife was so sad and so angry."

He went into the church and returned with a big wooden box filled with papers and leather-bound books.

"These are the parish records for the Dunbars, but if you need the MacEwan ones you will have to ask Father Charles in St Antony's on your side of the Cut. He has all those records in his keeping."

Malle nodded. "I see. Thank you, Father."

They began to go through the documents, starting at the earliest, two hundred years before, when the first Dunbars had moved into the area that the MacEwans had already more or less claimed as their own, even though they had no legal rights to it. The feud, they could see, had started almost as soon as the families had met.

The first argument was border dispute, when the MacEwans demanded the rights to that first piece of land. It legally belonged to the Dunbars, however, since they had bought it outright. After that there were skirmishes over grazing rights, and even arguments about

who was working on which estate. There was also a fight for supremacy between them over who had more status and wealth, but nobody really cared but the families themselves.

Occasionally there were squabbles with other families too, but these were usually small in scale, short-lived, and easily settled; however, the animosity between the MacEwans and the Dunbars went on unabated, until Isobell appeared.

"Here is their wedding certificate." Father John took out a fragile piece of parchment that was carefully pressed in the leaves of a book. *Donnan McLeod Dunbar of the Parish of Saint Antony, Invergill, Scotland, married Isobell Maria MacEwan, Parish of Saint Laurence, Invergill, Scotland, on the 10th Day of February, Year of Our Lord 1223.*

He handed it to Malle and she gazed at it, wondering if she was holding in her hand the answer to a two-hundred-year-old mystery.

The answer to the feud cannot be as simple as this, she thought.

As if he were reading her mind, Father John spoke up. "I think," he said, frowning, "that the secret of what is keeping this feud going—not what started it—lies in the reason for Isobell's death. I think that the original dispute started over the land claim. That is the most likely explanation, but now it seems that someone is fanning the flames for some reason of his own." He shook his head slowly. "And whoever is doing it needs to be stopped, and quickly, before there are more killings."

Father John looked at the beautiful young woman before him. He had seen the argument between Craig and Malle beside the grave, and in his long years of studying human nature he had always observed that people who disliked each other most at first were the ones who fell most deeply in love later. He had the strongest feeling that Craig and Malle would do just that.

9

Nightmare

Malle was thoughtful on the way home. The wedding between the two young people had been like something out of a fairy tale. It had moved her immensely, and she was determined to go and see Father Charles to find out what her side of the family's story was. She had never really believed in love at first sight, but Donnan and Isobell were living proof that it existed. When the love of his life died, something in Donnan died too. He lived for only a few years afterwards and died from "a short illness." She had heard of people dying simply because they wanted to, and that might have been what had happened to Donnan. When Isobell left him, he had nothing to live for.

She sighed. She had a slightly clearer picture now of what was going on but she decided that she simply could not think about it anymore. She was glad she had met Father John. He was the sweetest person she had encountered for a long time, and she would have loved to talk to him for longer, but his church was out of bounds to her, on the Dunbar side of the Cut.

That reminded her of Craig, and that kiss. Despite its brutal beginnings, it had ended up being a thrilling experience. But how could that be when she was still so angry with him? That was the question she had been asking herself at intervals all through the day, and now, as she put it out of her mind, another worry came to replace it. She had broken her word to her mother and ventured onto Dunbar land, and her sense of honor would not let her keep quiet about it.

She groaned. Her mother never screamed or shouted when Malle did wrong, but there was always a look of quiet pain on her face that hurt Malle more than if she had yelled at her.

She walked Arthur into the castle courtyard just as one of the kitchen maids, Tessie, came out with a flagon of ale and an earthenware cup.

“I saw ye comin’ in Mistress,” she said, smiling. “Ye looked as if ye needed ane o’these!”

Malle sighed with relief. “You saved my life, Tessie! Thank you!” She gulped the entire cup down in a most unladylike fashion, then smiled at Tessie, who topped her by at least three inches. “Thank you again.”

Tessie curtsied. All the staff loved and respected their young mistress and her mother, because they both listened to them and treated them like people and not beasts of burden. The Laird was a little more distant but then he worked hard, unlike many others of his kind. She watched Malle as she skipped off into the castle.

“Aboot time that lassie wis merrit,” she remarked to her friend Janice, who was even shorter than Malle.

“Weel, that’s her ain business,” she said in a philosophical tone. “But I tell ye this, Tessie, there’s nane o’ thae young cockerels oot there that’s fit tae kiss her feet!”

“Ye’re no’ wrang there, hen,” Tessie agreed.

~

Her mother was in the library when Malle went in, still poring over some of the journals and letters. Her face lit up when she saw Malle. “You look tired, darling,” she said, patting a chair beside her. “How was your day? Interesting?” She looked eagerly at her daughter.

Malle had been agonizing over whether to tell her mother about the kiss, but in the end she decided not to. After all, it would never happen again, and she decided to put it to the back of her mind and let it rest there until it faded away entirely.

She smiled at Margaret. “It has been an interesting day, but I have to tell you something, Mammy.” She dropped her eyes from her mother’s and began to twist her hands on the table, a sure sign of worry, stress, or guilt.

Margaret laid a hand on her daughter's. "Tell me, Malle, is anything wrong?" There was an edge of panic in her voice. "Did someone hurt you?"

"No, nothing like that, Mammy." Malle shook her head. " I disobeyed you."

Margaret's brow creased in a deep frown. "Why?" she asked. "And how?"

Malle sighed and suddenly the words rushed out. "I went onto Dunbar land," she confessed. "I am so sorry, Mammy. I broke my word to you."

There was a pause, which Margaret broke with an exasperated sigh.

"That is not what angers me, Malle," she said tersely. "Anything could have happened to you. We would not have known where you were—you could have been arrested for God's sake! Why did you do such a thing?"

Malle passed a hand over her eyes for a moment. "I went to the graveyard as you told me to, Mammy," she began, then she began to tell her mother the story of the book of condolence and how she had gone to the grave and wept over the gravestone. She omitted Craig's part in the story altogether, but when she told her mother about Father John, she was delighted.

"Father John Baxter?" she asked in disbelief.

Malle nodded. "Do you know him?"

"Indeed I do!" she replied, smiling from ear to ear. "From ages ago. He Christened me."

"He did not mention it," Malle remarked doubtfully.

"I was very small at the time!" she answered, and they laughed. "He would not have recognized me. My name has changed, and I am probably one of hundreds of babies he Christened over the years." She was silent again for a moment. "Malle, I must ask you never to do such a thing again. And I know you are not accustomed to taking a guard out with you on our own land, but please do so from now on."

She looked out of the window and shook her head in puzzlement. “I have a strange uneasy feeling that something bad is going on around here. I have no idea what it is, but until we find out, it is better to be safe than sorry. Please obey me next time, Daughter. I would hate to have to confine you to the castle.”

“You are right, Mammy,” she conceded. “It was foolish of me to do what I did.”

“I will not tell your father—this time, Malle. But there are no second chances, do you understand?”

Malle looked into her mother’s eyes, which were so like her own, and said, “I promise, Mammy, and thank you.” She knew that her mother was a woman of her word, and whatever she said she meant.

“Did you find out anything else, Mammy?” she asked.

“A lot of interesting bits and pieces, but nothing that can help us,” Margaret replied. She went to pour them both a glass of wine, then they went through to the parlor where they sat in comfortable silence with their arms around each other. Malle loved this part of the day, and being with her mother was the best part of all.

~

However, memories of the day could not be kept away forever, and although the last few hours had been quiet and contented, now that her mind was not occupied with anything else, she found that the memory of the kiss had come back to her with full force.

It had only been unpleasant for the first few seconds; after that she had given herself up to it with great delight. If she closed her eyes she could feel the rasp of his beard against the soft skin of her cheek, and the hard muscle of his chest under her hands as she made a futile attempt to push him away. Strangely though, in the first few seconds after the kiss he had looked just as confused as she felt.

She got into bed and lay for a while looking into the darkness. A half moon was making its way across the sky, and she wondered what it would feel like to be lying here in her soft bed with a strong man’s

arm around her, sheltering and protecting her.

Her mother had already told her about the mysteries of love, so she would not be entirely unprepared for marriage, but the thought made her shiver with both fear and anticipation. She knew that she did not want a huge man like Craig, and wondered for the first time what Donnan had looked like. The name had always conjured up younger versions of her father; average height, wiry, and pleasant-faced, if not exactly handsome.

She had seen one painting of Isobell, which was no doubt highly stylized, but she had been a stunning beauty, with fair hair, brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a full, well-shaped mouth.

Malle sighed. She was exhausted, but she tossed and turned for a long time before she drifted off to sleep.

Then she plunged straight into the terrifying world of a nightmare.

She was standing in a beautiful forest under the light of a full moon, enchanted by the world around her. The air was balmy, as it sometimes was in a summer twilight, and all the branches of the trees were gilded in silver. Every leaf underfoot was outlined in the same way, and even though she was walking barefoot, none of the twigs or pine needles scratched her. She sighed, then took a great breath of air, scented with a fresh fragrance of the conifers around her. It was paradise, and she hugged herself and closed her eyes, tilting her face to the moon and smiling.

When she opened them again she screamed. Instead of the slim evergreens she had seen a moment before, there were huge trees with thick, gnarled trunks and branches that blotted out the moonlight. Every tree had a tombstone in front of it, and the name "Malle MacEwan" was on every one. The sight sent a shaft of fear into her that was so strong that she screamed. She saw her birthday on each one of them, but the date of her death was different on every stone, so she had no idea which was the right one.

She could not move. Her feet seemed to be stuck to the forest floor; she pulled and tugged, then bent her knees and tried to jump, but nothing worked. She was trapped in the middle of a forest of tombstones, and she could go nowhere. She knelt down and wept with sheer terror and despair,

then she felt a hand on each of her shoulders.

She looked up. Silhouetted against the moon was the shape of a tall man's head. The rest of him was in darkness, but as soon as he spoke she knew who it was.

"Get up, Malle," Craig said. However, his voice, unlike its usual gravelly tone, was silky. "Kiss me and I will free you."

She tilted her face up to his, then felt his mouth come down on hers, sweetly and tenderly. The kiss lasted for a few moments, then he drew away, but when she opened her eyes he was nowhere to be seen. However, he had kept his promise; when she tried to lift her feet again it was easy, and she sighed with relief. The slim conifer trees had returned and there were no grave markers anywhere.

She took a step forward and screamed. The ground beneath her feet was no longer soft and yielding, but covered in sharp stones and broken seashells that cut into the tender soles of her feet and made her weep tears of pain. She could not stop walking, for that made the pain even worse, so she labored on. She looked up once, and Craig was standing a hundred yards away, laughing.

At last she got to the end of the rocky patch and looked up to scream at Craig, but he was gone; all that was left of him was his mocking laughter.

Another Killing

Malle woke up with a start. She could tell by the position of the half-moon that it was still very early in the morning, and that dawn was still hours away. Still half in the dream, she checked her feet for cuts and bruises, and was surprised to find that they were smooth and unmarked, without a trace of blood anywhere.

She sank back on her pillow with a feeling of complete relief, but an even stronger feeling of resentment against Craig Dunbar than before. She had asked him to leave her alone, but now he was even invading her dreams!

She turned over and closed her eyes, expecting to struggle to go to sleep, but she slipped away immediately, and slumbered dreamlessly for the rest of the night.

~

She woke to the sound of angry voices reaching her faintly from outside, and jumped out of bed to run along the passage to a room overlooking the courtyard. There she saw a crowd of men yelling at each other, and since each one was trying to be the loudest so that he could be heard over the din, the noise was almost deafening.

Malle ran back to her room and dressed hastily. She could wash later, she decided; this was far more important. She ran downstairs barefoot without making a sound, just in time to see a tall, bearded, redheaded man striding into the courtyard. Craig Dunbar plowed into the throng, scattering men right and left as he made his way to the front of the crowd.

“Enough!” he cried. He was wearing his claymore by his side, and he kept his hand on it as he spoke. How dare he walk into this castle as if

he owned it? Malle was staggered by his arrogance, and even more so when his father joined him.

Then she saw the most baffling and outrageous thing of all; her own father and mother came out to join them. The two families kept a wary distance from each other, but one clan was in enemy territory, and was not suffering for it. What was going on here? Malle was raging.

She drew closer and stood at the back of the crowd to listen. They were all rough working men, and every one of them was furious.

“You might be wondering what made the Dunbars and the MacEwans come together like this,” he began. “I thank Laird MacEwan for allowing us on his land, as this is because of a situation that concerns both our families and all of you.”

There was a low rumbling from a few dozen men’s voices at this announcement. The MacEwan workers were not happy that the Dunbar workers were there on what they considered to be their territory, even though it belonged to their Laird, and the Dunbar laborers were not happy either, feeling threatened and endangered on their enemy’s land.

At the moment that Craig began to speak, one of the MacEwan workers stood up to shout at him. “Whit are ye here for big man? Ye’re no gaunnae dae onythin’ wi’ that big knife!”

For answer, Craig sighed, unbuckled the claymore, and dropped it on the ground, then stood in front of the man, chest to chest, spreading his arms out in a crucifix shape. “Do your worst, my man,” he said reasonably. “I will not stop you.”

The man gulped and took a step back, looking embarrassed, and Craig took a small flask of whisky from the pouch at the side of his kilt. He held it up to its owner then handed it to Laird MacEwan.

“If this happens again I will flatten you,” he informed him, then he pushed him away. There was an angry murmur among the MacEwan workers. Someone shouted an insult at someone else, a bit of pushing and punching began, and a scuffle broke out between the two sides. Craig cast his eyes heavenward and plunged into the fray again. This

time he cracked two heads together, one from each side. Then he roared: “Stad!” in Gaelic. “Stop!” and silence fell immediately.

Despite herself, Malle was impressed, not only by the volume of his voice, but by the instant obedience of his men. Her father had also been going around separating scuffling men from each other, but he did not have Craig’s deep voice, which sounded like the deepest drumbeat she had ever heard.

Now she wanted to join her family, feeling threatened by the rough men around her. She pushed past Craig and he glared down at her, opening his mouth to snap at her, but she tilted her head back and smiled in a smug fashion. “Please say whatever is on your mind, Dunbar,” she invited him. “But have a care. We are on *my* ground now.”

He glared at her for a moment then clamped his mouth shut again.

Malle went around to the front of the crowd to join her parents, and Margaret frowned at her. “Malle, you should not be here!” she hissed. “This is no place for you!”

“I want to see what is going on, Mammy,” she replied. “I am part of this family and this concerns me too.”

Margaret sighed. “Stay quiet then,” she instructed. Malle nodded.

Craig’s eyes followed her as she left him and went to stand with her parents. Her hair was still tangled from sleep, her dress not properly laced and crumpled because it had been lying in a heap on the floor. If he had not disliked her so much he would have found her adorable in her tousled state.

For a moment, their gazes locked, green eyes on gray, and hers widened as if in surprise before they looked away...but in that moment, all his animosity towards her vanished. He knew he needed to talk to her and make things right between them.

When Craig began to speak, he did so in Gaelic, so that all his workers could not use the excuse that they could not understand him. Nearly everyone in the Highlands spoke Gaelic, but Craig spoke it like a working person and not like a nobleman, so they respected him more.

“The reason why we are all here today is because another man has died,” he said heavily, “from Laird MacEwan’s estate, and his name was Angus Morrison.”

Malle gave a gasp and her heart missed a beat. She was acquainted with Angus; he and his wife and four children lived on a cottage on the edge of the estate, and she knew them to be hardworking and kind people. What could they have done to deserve this?

“Something sinister is going on,” Craig was saying gravelly. “And we are determined to get to the bottom of this before someone else is killed, so I am asking you all, if you can think of anything that might be of help to us, please come and see my father or me. My father is your Laird, I am his son, and it is our duty to take care of you. Whatever you say will be kept secret, and this I swear on the blood of Christ.” He crossed himself and stood back.

Malle was acutely aware of him but determined not to show it. Her eyes swept over the faces of all the men in front of her and lit on Alan Bruce, who was standing at the edge of the crowd. She had not really looked at him before.

She had disliked him laying his hands on her when he had helped her father to subdue her; something within her found him sinister and threatening, especially when he stared at her as he was doing now.

Malle prided herself that she never dropped her gaze from anyone, and this time was no exception. She stared at him until his eyes slid away from hers, then he wandered away and disappeared from her sight. She felt frightened; she always trusted her instinct and it had never failed her before.

Still, it would be unjust to condemn an innocent man on the basis of her suspicions, and she would look foolish, so she said nothing.

Presently, the two lairds went inside and Craig followed them, much to Malle’s relief. She was not in the mood for another spat with him. She went upstairs to wash, but was unwilling to admit to herself that she wanted to look pretty for him, then came down into the courtyard with the intention of taking Arthur out for a ride, only to find that Craig was standing there watching her coming out of the main

entrance.

She was wearing a riding habit of gray wool and her hair was bound up and tied in a knot on top of her head. She looked elegant, yet mischievous at the same time, and he found himself desperately craving another one of her kisses. Not a stolen one, but a tender, willing exchange of affection.

Malle sped up her pace and gave him a terse nod of acknowledgement, to which he replied with an equally abrupt bow, and he watched her straight-backed purposeful stride as she walked into the stables and found Arthur placidly chewing hay. He whickered in greeting as he saw her, and she laughed softly and rubbed his velvet nose before kissing it.

“He is a beautiful horse,” Craig said, as he came up behind her to stroke Arthur’s mane. He could think of nothing else to say; he, who had always been so confident with women, felt like a ten-year-old boy again, tongue-tied with shyness.

“Yes, you said so before.” Malle’s tone was irritable. The groom had saddled Arthur and Malle was about to lead him out, but Craig was standing in her way.

“Excuse me, please,” she snapped. Craig could have kissed her right there and then. She was at her most lovely when she was angry.

“I would like to talk to you,” he said reasonably. “Surely that is not too much to ask?”

She stared at him for a moment and bunched her fists, then screwed up her eyes. “Write me a letter,” she hissed through gritted teeth. “Now let me out, Dunbar, before I remind you again whose castle this is and call a guard!”

He looked down into her eyes, now dark with anger, then bowed and stepped back, but his eyes followed her as she walked away.

Malle knew that she would calm down in a short while. Somehow Arthur’s placid temperament transferred itself to her as she was riding him. The opposite happened with Craig; just looking at him made her angry.

The Highlands were beautiful in spring, when the heather, having rested after winter, began to spread its pink carpet over the hills, preparing for the glorious riot of color in the summer. Bluebells lurked underneath the fir trees, and the bright lemon yellow stripes of gorse bushes were everywhere. The farmers were busy planting seeds, plowing fields, and delivering baby animals of all varieties.

Malle stopped to watch a pair of lambs running and jumping on all four legs at once in the inimitable comic way of all baby sheep. Soon it would be time for their mothers to stop being balls of wool with legs and start resembling animals again when the shearing season began.

A drop of water landed on the back of her hand and she groaned with disappointment. It was beginning to rain, however, this was not going to be a light shower, but a torrential downpour. She urged Arthur into a trot, then a canter, but even so, they were both drenched by the time they got back to the castle. Malle dismounted from Arthur and dripped her way along to the stables. There, to complete her miserable day, stood a determined and persistent Craig Dunbar.

An Apology

"Are you still here?" She was annoyed and he could see that she was in a very bad mood.

"Apparently." He looked down at himself as if to check, then smiled at her.

She sighed irritably. "I am soaked, and I am freezing. Can you please tell me what you want, Dunbar?"

"First of all, can you please stop calling me by my surname?" he asked. "I have a perfectly serviceable Christian name, Craig. Can you bear to call me that?"

She nodded.

"May I call you Malle?" he asked.

"If you wish," she replied tersely. She was shivering and pulled her cloak around herself but that was drenched too.

"You will catch a cold," he said gently. Then, to her utter amazement, he took off his cloak and wrapped it around her, then swept her off her feet and ran across the courtyard from the stable to the main entrance of the castle. He put her down and stepped back with a low bow.

"Thank you...Craig," she said faintly, astonished. She called one of the maidservants to bring some mulled wine. "Sit in the parlor. I will be down soon."

Craig sat down by the fire. The two lairds were still talking, which was a small miracle, he thought. He had left them when the rain started and he knew that Malle would be back. He was alone for once, without anyone to disturb him, with no calls on his time, waiting for a

beautiful woman to join him.

Malle watched him for a few minutes from behind the edge of the door. He was utterly relaxed, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He almost looked like a different person, staring into the fire without making a sound. Off guard, his face looked peaceful, even gentle.

Then suddenly he said, “You can come out now, Malle.” There was a laugh in his voice as he stood up.

“How did you know I was here?” she asked, as she went in and poured herself a glass of wine.

“I have eyes on my ears,” he replied, eyes twinkling

Malle laughed then spluttered as she choked on her wine. Her eyes were streaming tears, but for once they were not tears of anger, sadness, or pain—but laughter. He thumped her on her back, almost knocking her off her chair, and gradually her tears subsided; he wiped them away with a snow-white kerchief. Their faces were very close, but she did not pull back or push him away, and he held himself back from kissing her only with the utmost self-restraint. With any other woman he would have taken the chance, but not with Malle.

At last, he took a deep breath and said: “I wanted to sincerely apologize for kissing you that day, especially in that manner. It was wrong of me, Malle.”

She stared at him for a moment, stunned. It was the last thing she had expected him to say. “Why did you do it then?” she asked at last. “I was really afraid of you…you are so much bigger and stronger than I am, and I could have done nothing if you had forced yourself on me. I thought that you might, that you might kill me.”

He was shocked. He sat forward in his seat and grabbed her hands in his. They looked impossibly small. No, she could not have done him much damage with these. He was surprised that she did not even try to pull away.

“I am both sorry and ashamed.” His voice was gentle and he could not meet her eyes with his. “I did not think about what I was doing. I just

wanted you to be quiet, and that was the quickest way I could think of to do it. But when you were in my arms, I did not want to let you go. It felt so...so right, and it had been a very long time since I kissed a woman, and I was just as shocked as you were, Malle. Now that I look back, I was so rough with you and I do not blame you for being displeased with me."

"Look at me," she said quietly. He raised his head and she studied him for a moment, her gaze roaming over his face as if she wanted to memorize it.

Malle saw a strong face, with a heavy brow over deep-set gray eyes. His nose was slightly Roman, and his mouth was beautifully sculpted, with a full and sensual lower lip. He had the kind of thick, springy hair that would never fall out, and his beard, though thick, was closely shaved to his face.

When he was viewed in silhouette his head looked as though it was edged in fire as the sunlight struck it. He was a beautiful, strong, healthy man, and now that he had apologized for his mistake she could see the good heart that beat behind the tough exterior.

Malle had a feeling that inside he was as soft as butter, but he could never express his tender feelings, since a man, especially a laird, was meant to show strength and not weakness.

"Thank you," she said softly, with a little smile. "It takes a big man to admit he is wrong."

He looked down at himself. "I cannot deny being a big man!" He laughed and she joined in, then slid her hands out from between his, and he suddenly felt bereft.

"And I will confess that I felt something too," she said awkwardly. "I liked being in your arms; you made me feel safe and I do not know why. However, you are a Dunbar, and I am a MacEwan, so there can never be anything between us."

He nodded resignedly and for some reason she was annoyed. Damn him! She wanted more of an argument, not immediate compliance!

Kiss me anyway, she thought, looking hungrily at his lips, which were

so close to hers. But she was disappointed, since he made no effort to do so.

He sighed, nodding in agreement. “That is true,” he said sadly. “But I know that there will be a time when all this is over.” He looked out of the window, his eyes far away. “Maybe not soon, but you can never tell. Your father and mother are speaking to my father. Is that not a hopeful sign?”

“Indeed,” she replied. “I hope something will come of it. There is one thing I need to tell you, though, Craig. There was a man standing amongst your workers, and he made me shiver in fear. Maybe I am being fanciful, but I did not like the look of him, and he stared at me as if he would bore a hole through me. There was such hate in his eyes! He has a long black beard, very greasy looking and dirty, gray hair and dark eyes, and he looked very big, but not fat. He looked like a barrel, in fact.”

Craig laughed. “It sounds like Alan Bruce,” he replied. “I can understand why you would be scared, Malle; he is very fearsome-looking. Many folk do not like him because of that, but I assure you, he has been my father’s loyal worker for years and would not hurt a fly. I would trust him with my life.”

“Hmmm,” she said doubtfully. “I will take your word for it, but my instincts tell me that there is something amiss with him. However, I cannot have a man arrested because I do not like his appearance, or there would be many more men in jail around these parts.”

Craig laughed heartily at that. “You do us a great disservice, Malle,” he observed. “When God handed out gifts he gave nearly all of them to women. Look at you. You have beautiful soft skin, shining hair, gentle natures, alluring bodies, and you give the world the gift of children. What do we have? Hair everywhere, bones that jut out, big muscles, and ugly feet. Sometimes we even go bald. We are not pretty or delicate. Do not blame us, blame God!”

“I can blame God and still be a little frightened, can I not?” she asked, then she smiled. It was the first great open smile she had given him, and he felt wonderful, as if she was blessing him.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,” he whispered.

Her eyes opened wide in disbelief. “Th-thank you,” she stammered. “I doubt that, but thank you anyway.” She felt her face flushing and looked down at her hands, which she was twisting nervously on her lap. *Kiss me, for the love of God!* she thought desperately. *Don’t make me have to do it!*

He put his big calloused hand over hers, and she looked up. His eyes were gentle as he leaned forward.

Just when Malle thought she was going to get her wish, Laird Dunbar and the MacEwans came back into the room. They both looked grim, but no one looked angry.

“Craig,” Malcolm Dunbar said thoughtfully, “have you had any word from the tenants or crofters about the matter we discussed?”

Craig shook his head. “No, Father,” he replied. “But there has not been much time.”

The lairds sat down face to face. Malle looked up at her mother, who was almost weeping with happiness.

“They are working together,” she whispered in Malle’s ear.

Malle frowned and raised her eyebrows. “Really?” she mouthed, and Margaret nodded. Malle was not so sure. Hundreds of years of fighting could not be swept away by a few hours of talking between two men.

“Craig—may I call you Craig?” Kenneth asked.

Craig smiled. “Of course, M’laird,” he replied.

“We have decided to work together, your father and I,” Kenneth informed him.

“Which you would have discovered if you had stayed in the room,” Malcolm Dunbar said, voice dripping with sarcasm. Craig said nothing while Kenneth kept on talking.

“We are still talking, and barriers still exist between us, but neither of us want to see any more killing. If none of our workers will come forward with information, then we will go to them. We will each stay

on our own side of the Cut and ask questions of our own tenants and crofters. This may help us to gain their trust as well as their cooperation, particularly if they receive a little financial compensation for it. We are sure that they are willing to help, but may be afraid, so we will have to arrange protection for them."

"And their livestock may also be at risk, so we need to safeguard that too," Malcolm growled. "When I get my hands on this creature—or creatures—I will make him suffer!" His brow furrowed in a deep frown making his eyes dark and thunderous.

"On that we can all agree!" Kenneth said grimly.

Malle exchanged glances with Craig, and they smiled at each other, but Margaret intercepted the look. She frowned, thinking that she was not ready to trust a Dunbar. Not quite yet.

Malle was looking at Craig's hands, wondering how it would feel for him to caress her. He was the most desirable man she had ever met, but they were separated by a dispute that had gone on for hundreds of years before she was born, and had nothing to do with either her or Craig. She could have howled with frustration. It was all so pointless.

The Accident

When Craig went back to his own castle that afternoon he could think about nothing but Malle. He had been with dozens of women; he had a reputation for his exploits, but he had never found one he could fall in love with before. However, she was different.

She had an intelligence that was missing in many other people he had encountered, and not just women. She was fierce; she could stand up for herself against any man, as she had done with him, and yet he knew that she could be tender and womanly.

He knew it from the kiss, the way her pliant body had yielded to his, and he was beginning to know it from the way she talked to him and looked at him. She was tough and tender at the same time, while still being very feminine. In short, she was everything he wanted, and he realized that for the first time ever he cared about a woman, not for how she could make him feel in a carnal way, but for how she made him feel deep inside his heart and his mind.

He fell asleep thinking about her and he woke up thinking about her, and she stayed at the back of his mind all day.

When he got up, it was another cloudy day that threatened a downpour, and he felt his mood dip with the weather. He knew he was not going to see Malle that day unless he ventured onto MacEwan land, and although relations between the two families had thawed slightly, the guards would still arrest or chase away any Dunbar trespassers. Malle was not likely to venture onto Dunbar land to visit Isobell's grave for the same reason.

He tried to think of somewhere else he could find her and could think of none, but he was so depressed at the thought of not seeing her that he thought he would write a letter asking her to meet him. Then he

could pour out his heart to her, tell her how much he cared for her, and hope that she felt the same.

Having decided on a course of action, he felt better. He decided to pay a quick visit to the church to light a candle and say a prayer for both of them. Perhaps he should have asked God's advice in the first place, he thought ruefully.

~

Arthur was in a skittish mood that morning, so even though the sky looked unwelcoming and threatening, Malle decided to take him out for a gallop. This was one of Arthur's favorite activities, especially when wet weather had kept him cooped up for a few days. If denied this release, he had been known to kick down the door of his stall and make a bid for freedom, causing total chaos among the guards and stable hands. Subduing a horse the size of Arthur was not easy!

Malle wondered if she would manage to see Craig somehow today, then she chided herself for being stupid. How would Craig get onto their land without being arrested for trespass? She determinedly put the thought out of her mind. That way lay folly, but she must have been nursing the idea in her mind without realizing it, because suddenly she found herself riding towards the Cut.

She began to try to turn Arthur around, but he was not in the mood for taking orders; he rarely disobeyed her, but that day he had ideas of his own. He tossed his head and kicked his heels up before galloping at full speed straight for the Cut, then he flew over it with hardly a pause in his stride.

However, for a heavy horse like Arthur, a smooth landing in these conditions was impossible, and his huge feet hit the ground with such force that Malle was literally thrown out of the saddle and hurled into the air. She heard herself scream, and for a few seconds, there was a dizzying jumble of images before her eyes as she flew through the air to land on the wet ground with a jarring thud. It was a moment before the pain came, wave after wave of it hammering through her head.

She groaned and closed her eyes, but when she opened them the

world was still swimming in and out of focus and the only thing she could see clearly was the muddy ground she was lying on. She made a feeble attempt to get on her knees so that she could try to sit up, but she did not have the strength, and collapsing on her stomach again brought even more pain. Presently the world disappeared from her sight.

When she opened her eyes again, for a moment, she had no idea where she was. The thumping agony in her head had now been joined by even more pain, stabbing her from her backside, elbows, knees, and hips, and she began to weep. She wondered, in a brief moment of clarity, whether she should wait to die or try to get up and crawl, but a few seconds after that the blackness descended again.

~

Craig had been riding to take medicine to some of his tenants whose sheep had been suffering badly from foot rot, which was a common complaint in the boggy parts of his estate. His route took him past the church, so he turned his horse's head that way, and cantered towards the little gray building.

Then he saw the moaning, bedraggled form lying facedown on the ground and vaulted off his mount to see who it was and how he could help, and that was when he noticed Arthur calmly cropping the grass a few yards away.

His heart skipped a beat. "Malle!" he cried desperately. He ran up to her side and gently turned her over on her back, then lifted her shoulders and back onto his lap. His hands were infinitely gentle. "What has happened to you?"

She opened her eyes for a moment, looked into his, and smiled slightly. "Craig," she said groggily, then her eyes closed again.

He was incredibly relieved to see her smile, but worried when she passed out. It was beginning to rain again so he swept her up in his arms and took her into the church, then he laid her tenderly on one of the pews and went to fetch a candle so that he could inspect her properly. He felt all over for breaks in her arms, legs, and ribs, but

thankfully he found none, although he suspected that she would develop some painful and colorful bruises all over her body in the days to come. He was worried that she had injured her head, though; that was much more serious than a bruise, which would heal in a few days.

He lifted her onto his lap and put his arms around her, then held her close to him, waiting for her to regain consciousness. If she had not been in such a bad way this would be heavenly, he thought, nestling in each other's arms peacefully and sharing each other's warmth.

"God, bring her back to me and I will never say another angry word to her," he whispered. Then, as if in answer to his prayer, her eyelids fluttered open and she gazed at him again, but this time recognition dawned in her eyes.

He breathed out a deep sigh of relief, and gathered her closer, feeling her wet hair slide across his face. "Oh, God Malle, I thought you were dead," he breathed.

"Not yet, Craig," she whispered huskily. She put her hand to her forehead. "Although I feel as if I might be very soon!" She laughed, then winced.

"Don't say that!" he said angrily. "Don't ever say that!"

"I was only jesting." She rubbed her forehead again, not because it eased the pain, but because it gave her something to do to distract her from it. She became acutely aware of being in Craig's arms, her head cuddling closely under his chin, and knew that if she had not been in so much pain it would have felt blissful.

"I never thought I would be lying in the arms of a Dunbar," she mused, only half aware of what she was saying.

He looked at her, surprised. "Do you like it?" he asked softly.

"I do," she replied, smiling.

"And I like holding a MacEwan," he said tenderly. He cupped her face with one hand and ran his thumb down her cheekbone.

"I feel safe with you," she whispered. "I know you will never hurt me,

and I have never felt like that with any other man, not that I have much experience. My father makes me feel like that too, but you are not like him."

"He is a fine man." Craig smiled at her fondly. "And you, Malle, are a very fine woman."

"Thank you," she whispered. The gray eyes looking into hers were warm and shining, and suddenly she realized something. She loved him, this big, strong man who could be so fierce and yet so tender. "Hold me tighter, please," she said, her voice husky and pleading.

"Are you not sore?" he asked, frowning.

She shook her head. "Not if you hold me," she replied, and he pulled her more closely into the shelter of his arms. She felt his breath on her hair and heard the rapid, steady thudding of his heart, and realized there was nowhere else she wanted to be. She moaned with happiness, then he tilted her chin up so that their faces were almost touching, and although he said nothing, there was a question in his eyes.

Malle answered it by looking at his firm, well-shaped lips, then back at his eyes, then he touched his mouth to hers, very softly, as if afraid to hurt her.

However, she was not in pain. The ache in her head had lessened, or at least she had ceased to notice it as his lips caressed hers, and he moved his hand gently from her shoulder and arm, to her hip and thigh, then back to her face again, and she moaned in pleasure. He had kissed her before, but not gently and sensually like this. Eventually he drew away, but he could not seem to look away from her.

"Oh, Malle MacEwan," he murmured, running his thumb over the lips he had just kissed. "I am so in love with you."

I must have heard wrongly, she thought, her eyes widening in disbelief. Then she looked deeply into his eyes and realized that she had not.

"I love you too," she replied, hardly believing the words that were coming from her own mouth.

They stared at each other for a moment, then kissed again, and this

time it was a hungry, passionate exchange, and Malle felt desire shoot through her in a way that she never had before. She wanted to stay like this, in his arms, cradled against his body forever.

If Craig had been able to, he would have held her that way forever too. He loved everything about her, and he knew that it was never going to change. At last, after knowing so many different women, he had found the love of his life.

The truth hit them at the same time. He was a Dunbar and she was a MacEwan, and they could never be together while their families were still at war.

“This is madness, Craig,” she murmured sadly. “I wish we could be together. You are not like any man I have ever known before, but our families will never allow it.”

“Then damn our families!” he growled. “Malle, we only have one life to live and love. We may die tomorrow. Look what happened today! It could have been so much worse. We are young, and we have to live for today.”

“Our families are feuding, and have been for centuries,” she pointed out, shaking her head.

“There is a truce,” he replied. “Malle, this stupid feud does not concern us. We can leave. We can run away.”

She shook her head again and rubbed her forehead, realizing that the pain was coming back. “I could not do that to my parents.”

“I see,” he replied. He looked disappointed but understanding. He stood up, pulling her with him, and then, because he simply could not help himself, he kissed her again. “Then if I want to marry you, I will have to brave the wrath of both our families,” he said grimly.

“You would do that for me?” she asked in wonder.

“I have no choice,” he replied, smiling. “What else can a man in love do?”

Many Letters

They rode home together on Craig's horse, and Malle reveled in the feeling of having his strong arms around her. In fact, she wished the journey was longer. He wanted to see her inside, but she would not let him.

"They must not see me riding with you. I will tell them I fell off Arthur and a good Samaritan came to my rescue and helped me home. That is all they need to know, Craig," she said firmly. She did not kiss him but called a guard to accompany him to the Cut, then turned away and strode into the castle, where she got as far as the foot of the stairs before collapsing.

Unbeknownst to them, someone else had been close to the church. A face that Malle had seen—or imagined seeing—when she was dazed and bewildered. He was not supposed to be on MacEwan land, but he had to know what was happening between Malle and Craig. Now he did, and it was not good. It did not suit his purposes at all. He growled to himself and mounted his horse again. Something needed to be done, and quickly.

~

When Malle awoke she no longer had a headache, but she seemed to be wearing bandages just about everywhere she looked. There was one on her elbow, both her knees, and she could feel one on her forehead and her cheekbone. She could see purple bruises between them, and she could feel a huge and painful lump on the back of her head.

Margaret was bending over her, and when she saw Malle's eyes open, she let out a huge sigh of relief. "Thank God!" she cried. "I thought

you were never going to wake up! How are you, darling?"

"Fine, Mammy," Malle replied, managing a brave smile. "I am just a bit sore."

"Weel, Mistress," Jessie, the wise woman, said. "Ye were very lucky. If ye had hit yer heid much harder ye might no' be talkin' tae us noo."

Malle gave a feeble laugh, then winced as her head decided to ache again.

"What happened?" Margaret had tears in her eyes as she took both Malle's hands in hers and kissed them.

"A wild cat ran in front of Arthur and gave him a fright," she answered. "He skittered sideways, then I think he fell over a stone and stumbled. It was not his fault, Mammy, and I am a bit battered and bruised, but fine." *I hope I am a good enough liar,* she thought. She would have hated to see anything happen to Arthur.

"I have told you a hundred times that horse is too big for you!" Margaret protested. "Let us go to to the horse fair in Ardgour next week and find you a smaller one."

"No Mammy," Malle said firmly. "Arthur and I grew up together, and we are friends. What happened today was an accident."

Margaret sighed. "Malle, I wish you would listen to reason sometimes."

"I love you, Mammy." Malle leaned over and kissed her mother. "You are the best Mammy in the world."

"I know!" Margaret answered, laughing. "I have to be with a daughter like you! I have to go out for a while with your father. We are going to the horse fair in Aberdour. Maybe we will find you a nice gentle little mare there. Try to be good while I am gone!"

"Of course I will, Mammy," Malle said mischievously. "Am I not always good?"

"No!" Margaret replied, "but I love you anyway."

She kissed Malle and went out, leaving her alone to think. Something

had just come back to her, but she could not quite pin down the thought. Then slowly, hazily, it swam back into her memory.

While she had been only half conscious on the ground, someone had bent over her and touched her face. She had an impression of a man's dark face with a long beard, but it was so vague and blurred that she could not identify him. It might not even have happened. The thought of the experience made her shiver with fear and she resolutely put it out of her mind.

~

Craig was worried sick about her, but he could think of no way of sending a letter to Malle before he remembered Father John. A priest was never denied access anywhere, so he sat down the day after the accident and wrote:

My love,

I am going mad with worry about you. How are you? I wish I could come and see you, but as you know, that is impossible, and I wish I could tell everyone about our love, because I want the whole world to know. Our time will come soon though, I know it. Please write back and tell me you are well.

Your loving Craig

When Father John took the letter from Craig he smiled his serene smile at him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I never thought I would see the day when a MacEwan and a Dunbar would fall in love," he said happily. "It is indeed wonderful news."

"I asked you for secrecy, Father." Craig's voice was doubtful.

"Of course I will keep it to myself, Craig," Father John said firmly. "It was told to me under the seal of confession. Have no fear, young man. Your secret is safe with me."

"I will come back the day after tomorrow and try to be patient till then." Craig sighed. "Thank you Father."

“God bless you, Craig,” the old man answered, thinking how wonderful it felt to be the bearer of such good news.

~

Malle struggled downstairs to receive Father John in the parlor. When he handed Malle the folded and sealed piece of parchment she looked puzzled for a moment. Then, as she slit it open, her face became suffused with joy. She read it once, then again, then for a third time, while Father John watched the happiness spread over her features.

“Good news?” he asked, smiling.

“Oh yes, Father,” she replied. “The best!” She began to pen a letter back to him.

My dearest Craig,

Please be reassured that apart from a few cuts and scrapes I am well, but I am glad you cannot see me, for my bruises are every color of the rainbow. Thank you for helping me and for caring about me, and I hope we can be together soon.

All my love,

Malle

She sealed the parchment, kissed it, and gave it to the old priest. He stood up and looked at her fondly. “I wish you good health, Malle. Look after yourself and God bless you.”

“Thank you, Father,” she replied as she watched him leave. She hugged herself, then went to look out of the window. It was raining again, but nothing could depress her today. She decided to go back to the secret room which she had made more comfortable by putting a padded chair, a table, and a candelabra in it. She even had a special blanket for cold days, so she could spend hours in it if she wanted.

It was particularly cold on that day, even though it was approaching summer, so she wrapped her blanket around her and settled down for

a few hours of digging through the last three hundred years' worth of letters and diaries, and soon she was immersed in reading through one of Isobell's. This one was quite close to their wedding day, and as Malle read through it and Isobell expressed her hopes and fears for the future, Malle began to imagine that she was Isobell and she felt that the same things were happening to her.

Some of the pages were happy and lighthearted:

It snowed today and piled up as deep as our ankles. Donnan fell down in the snow and we had a great laugh! When we came in we warmed up with chicken stew and spiced ale, then sat by the fire until we both dozed off to sleep. What a glorious day it was!

Malle read on, and the tone of the letters changed from day to day according to Isobell's mood, and Malle almost felt that she was looking over Isobell's shoulder as she was writing. As she read on, she also realized that she was beginning to be happy when Isobell was happy, and sad or angry when Isobel felt the same way. It seemed as though she was reaching back through the past to hold Isobell's hand, and the thought made her uneasy, since it seemed as if Isobell was taking over her life completely.

Eventually she became restless and wandered to the window to look outside, but it was still raining relentlessly. She took out Craig's letter and read it again, then again, and soon she knew it by heart. However, she could not spend her day rereading the same letter ad infinitum, so she stowed it away safely where no one could find it.

For want of something else to do she went back to start reading the diaries again. She expected to be bored because she had read so many pages already, and so many of them dealt with the minutiae of Isobell's everyday life. But instead she was fascinated, even though every injured part of her body was beginning to ache and sting again. She was thinking about going back to bed with a cup of Valerian tea when she found the entry that made all the difference.

The Ambush

I had to tell Mungo that I could not keep the pledge I had made to him when we were twelve years old and I could not marry him. I will never forget the look on his face—he was so hurt, and I could practically see his heart break. I had to tell him that I had met someone else and I loved him with all my heart, and I had to follow where love led me. I am so desperately sorry for Mungo, but I cannot help it. He wished me good luck and I told him to go with God's blessing, then I watched him ride away. May God forgive me for doing such a terrible thing to such a worthy man, and I hope Mungo will forgive me too, and find someone much more deserving of his love than I am.

After that the narrative became rather strange, and Malle began to feel shivers running down her back. She read the diary entry for the next day and found it strangely unsettling.

I was riding in the forest today and I had a very strange feeling. I felt as though something was touching the middle of my back between my shoulder blades. I have seen men practicing archery by shooting arrows into circles drawn on trees and I felt as if I had a circle on my back. I heard strange rustlings in the woods behind me, but nothing happened. I urged Danny into a canter and I rode home at once. It was likely my vivid imagination, as Donnan suggested, but I do not think so. I think someone was following me. Since then he has never allowed me to go out on my own.

Malle opened the diary at another page, and this one was dated two days after the wedding. The tone of the writing had changed again. Isobell was obviously beside herself with excitement and happiness, and it seemed to leap off the page as she wrote with long quick

strokes of the quill.

I am so joyful that my heart is bursting with it. It seems that every flower in the world is blooming just for me. My Donnan is the most handsome, the most tender, and the most loving man in the world, and I do not know what I have done to deserve such happiness.

Malle smiled. She could practically hear Isobell's laughter coming off the page, and she felt a sense of well-being flooding over her. Isobell was in love, as she was, and there was no better feeling in the world.

There were a few pages that related to their intimate relations, and Malle felt herself blush while she was reading them. This was not a subject to which she had given much thought until she had met Craig, but she was receiving good instruction in it now!

Then everything changed. Malle saw a different hand, a firm masculine script, the letters almost graven into the paper. The words were grim and threatening, and suddenly the air in the room seemed to darken and thicken; the candles guttered and blew and her hair lifted as though a wind had blown through it. Malle looked around herself fearfully but there was no sign of anything or anyone in the room, and a few moments later she had put it down to her fertile imagination.

She unfolded the letter and read it.

My Dear Isobell,

I cannot believe you can be so cruel. You have been everything to me since we were twelve years old. I loved you the first moment I saw you, and God help me, I still do. I know that I am poorer that Donnan Dunbar, shorter in stature, and not so handsome, but I thought you could overlook those things and look to the man inside, who is burning with love and desire for you, and love me for who I am. I am the man who would lay down his life for you, and give away everything he owns for you, and you have broken my heart.

In time, I may be forced to do my duty and be married, but there will never be anyone else to take your place.

Donnan Dunbar is a very fortunate man…so far. But he took you from me, and you belong to me. Rest assured he will not have you for long, for if I cannot have you then he will not either. Just as you are mine, I am yours, and no one is going to hold you at night but I. Think about this the next time he kisses you, Isobell, and enjoy your happiness, for nothing lasts long in this life.

Your devoted Mungo

Malle gasped in horror at what was written on the page, because not only did she know that the threat had been carried out, but she knew who was going to be murdered. The letter made no mention of the victim's name, but the inference was that it was going to be Donnan. After all, why would a man kill the woman he loved?

A while after this letter her lifeless body was found facedown on the bedroom floor, and the feud began again in earnest. Malle was sure that Bruce was involved! Donnan had no reason to kill Isobell and she was very happy with him. Why would she commit suicide?

Bruce, she thought. *Could there be a connection between Alan Bruce and Mungo Bruce?*

Bruce was a very common Scottish name, but it was not inconceivable that the two men were from the same branch of the family. And it appears that the feud was not so big as to not be able to marry someone close to the Dunbars. After all, Isobell married a Dunbar.

Malle knew she needed to talk to someone, so she went in search of Margaret, then groaned as she realized that her parents had gone to the horse fair. Who else could she talk to?

Damn it! she thought desperately. The only person she could think of was Craig, but to get to him she would have to ride into the Dunbar Estate, putting herself in danger of being arrested. However, Craig would never let her go to the dungeons, and that was the thought that made up her mind. Craig had to see these letters.

She thought about asking a guard to accompany her, but she knew that they would stop her as she got to the Cut, so she collected Arthur and trotted casually out of the courtyard as if she was going for a

pleasant amble around the estate. It was a warm day with a white hazy sky, and any other day she would have enjoyed riding, but today she just wanted to get to Craig. She waited until she was out of sight of the castle then urged Arthur into a gallop. This time, however, they waded through the Cut, and she told herself she did not mind having wet feet for a few hours.

I must look a sight, she thought. *Bruises, scratches, bandages everywhere!* She laughed aloud, then cried out as another rider sped out of the forest and stopped directly in front of her. Arthur reared up again for the second time in two days and she fell heavily on the hard ground, inflicting even more injuries on herself. She lay, moaning, unable to do anything to help herself.

Then someone was bending over her. She had a sense of familiarity, then shock. In her dazed and confused state, she could see the man the way she had seen him before. It was the figure who had been bending over her at Isobell's grave: Alan Bruce.

His dark eyes were burning into hers and she recognized the glint of madness in them. Terrified, she instinctively hugged her arms around herself and tried to curl up into a ball, but it was no use. His dark beard was so long that it was brushing her chin and neck, and his breath reeked of whisky and fish; she almost gagged on the stench.

He saw the revulsion on her face and laughed, then deliberately breathed on her hard so that she shut her eyes and turned away in disgust. She gave a moan of pain as the bump on her head, still sore from the previous fall, began to throb again. When he grabbed a hold of her hair and began to drag her towards the pine trees, she screamed.

Pine needles scratched her skin and snagged her hair, tugging at its roots and making her howl with agony. She was in a nightmare of anguish. Her body was stinging and aching from her existing injuries and the new ones that were being inflicted.

The torture ended when he let go of her hair, then stood above her and drew his broadsword. From her position on the forest floor he looked even more menacing, seeming to resemble a thick, gnarled tree. She stared up at him, paralyzed with fear, while he did nothing

but stare at her with an evil smile on his ugly face.

“Get up, Mistress MacEwan,” he said at last. “Ye have nae business on Dunbar land. Whit wid happen tae ye if ye were caught? There’s some awfy bad types roon here that wid jist love lae get their hauns on a wee bit o’ MacEwan meat!”

Malle saw the great broadsword at his belt and realized that if she were not going to die on its blade she had to keep him talking to her.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked with a puzzled frown. “What have I ever done to you?”

“You are a MacEwan.” he replied, as if that explained everything.

“And you are a Bruce, not a Dunbar,” she said, shaking her head. “As far as I know, you are close to them, but our families have no quarrel.”

“Aye we dae, Mistress, oor three faimlies hae had a quarrel for twa hunner years!” His voice was low and vicious.

“And Mungo Dunbar?” she asked, finally realizing the truth. “What does it have to do with him?”

At once, she realized she had said the wrong thing.

“Whit d’ye knaw about my faimly?” he demanded. “Whit has my faimly got tae dae wi’ you? Mistress, you have jist signed yer death warrant!”

Alan Bruce raised his sword and then he took a menacing step towards her. She took a step back, then realized that her back was going to hit a tree. She turned and fled as fast as her legs would carry her, but she was only a small

woman, and despite his bulk Alan could move very fast. He was gaining on her, but was still a few yards away when she tripped over a tree root and fell forward onto the carpet of pine needles.

Malle was too dazed to care what happened next. She wanted to do no more than lie on her face on the forest floor till Alan Bruce put her out of her misery.

200 years

It was then that she heard the furious thudding of hoofbeats coming towards her, and felt the ground shaking with their impact. Then a bloodcurdling scream was let loose and she knew at once who it was.

Craig had been on his way to the church to give Father John another letter when he heard the scream. He did not think twice, but turned towards the direction of the sound; he would have known Malle's voice anywhere. He was just in time. Standing over his love was Alan Bruce with a huge broadsword in his hand, ready to strike.

Craig reined his horse in, afraid that if he proceeded any further, Alan would kill Malle.

In a flash, Craig measured his options. He could ride forward and strike his enemy's head off, but Malle was very close to Alan's feet, and he might kill her. He could try to make peace with him, but judging by the madness in Bruce's eyes, that was going to be a waste of time. Then again, he could take him on in single combat. Craig was bigger and heavier than most men, and he thought that his chances of winning a duel were a great deal better than Alan's.

Slowly, he got off his horse, not wanting to make any sudden moves that would startle or antagonize his enemy.

The man gave him an evil smile, but Craig advanced towards him. "No one will hear you scream here and no one can save you. And if you kill her then I will kill you. Make no mistake, Alan Bruce, if you murder this woman the rest of your life will be measured in moments. That I promise you."

Suddenly Alan leaped at Craig, his sword swinging through the air in

a wide arc. Craig blocked it then twisted the blade of Alan's sword away from him so that he had room to aim for his chest, but Alan turned his body sideways so that Craig's thrust went wide. Alan lunged forward again but was forced back by a heavy blow from Craig's weapon on his own. They went on this way for ten times, each one lunging forward and being forced back again and again before Craig's sheer strength prevailed. He took one long step forward and swiped sideways at Craig's neck, and in trying to avoid it Alan stumbled backward and hit a tree trunk with his head.

Craig strode over to where he lay slumped against the tree, then he raised his sword to strike, but he stopped short when Malle screamed and tugged at his sword arm.

"No! No, Craig!" she cried. "We are not going to kill him. That would bring us down to his level, and we need to know if he can tell us what started this feud. Be at ease, lovie."

"I do not know how you can be so calm, Malle," Craig said, shaking his head in disbelief. He had not taken his eyes off Alan, and now he leaned forward and disarmed him, throwing his sword away carelessly.

"You are fortunate that this lady is merciful," Craig said grimly, holding the point of his sword against Alan's throat. "Or you would be lying with your head several feet away from your body by now. She is the only person who could have stopped me from killing you, for by God I could not have stopped myself!"

He leaned over Alan and hauled him up by the front of his shirt, his dark gray eyes now almost black with rage.

"Now you are going to give me answers or I will torture them out of you!" he growled.

"Please Craig," Malle begged. "Do not speak like that."

"He tried to kill you, Malle, and an attack on you is an attack on me. We are one now." He took a step forward so that he was almost nose to nose with Alan. He was holding up his sword so that its thick blade was exactly the same distance from both of their faces, then he forced Alan to sit down again.

Alan sat, with an expression of impotent fury on his face, but when his gaze flicked over to Malle for a second, it was replaced by one of utter malevolence.

Malle did not flinch. She never did, and he was the one to drop his gaze first. When he looked up a few moments later, she was still staring at him.

Alan Bruce had never felt so thoroughly intimidated, even by Craig.

“So tell me why Fergus was murdered?” Craig demanded. “And do not insult my intelligence by telling me he had nothing to do with it. I know you. I have known you for years. You are a hard worker but you have a cruel streak. I did not realize quite how cruel, though.”

“He has a wee bit land on tap o’ the Bruins Beck Hill,” Alan replied grudgingly, “an’ half a dozen good Heilan’ coos an’ a bull. I made him a good offer for them but he widnae sell.”

“So you killed him?” Craig’s voice was incredulous. “For a parcel of land and a few cows?”

Alan shrugged, as if to say *what else was I supposed to do?*

Craig shocked Malle by coming out with a curse word that she had never heard anyone use before, and hoped never to hear again. Craig stepped forward and slapped Alan on the face with the front and back of his right hand. He wore a heavy ring on his middle finger which slashed Alan’s cheek and made him yelp in pain.

Craig stood back, breathing heavily as he glared down at the person he had once called a friend but who had now revealed himself as a vengeful, vicious monster.

Alan sat wide-eyed looking up at him, quaking inside. He knew that Craig occasionally went into a rage, especially when there was injustice, but it had never been directed at him before.

“Now that I accept that you are a cold-blooded murderer,” Craig said disgustedly, “nothing else is going to surprise me. Angus Morrison?”

“Angus bought a horse fae Fergus at the horse fair in Aberdour,” he replied. “They became pals. They had tae go into town tae meet each

other tae have a dram, an' that's where I made Fergus the offer, an' where he turned me doon. Angus wis there an' a' an' he heard the arguing. When Fergus wis found dead he came tae me an' asked me if I had anythin' tae dae wi' it. I said naw. I'd hae been stupid tae tell him I had, so I had tae kill him in case he told anybody. I threatened his wife an' weans tae keep quiet an' a'."

"You sound so proud of yourself!" Malle said disgustedly.

Alan swung his gaze around to her again, stared at her for a moment, then looked away. "I didnae enjoy it, Mistress, but I had tae dae it."

"Why?" she demanded angrily. "What right did you have to take away the lives of two innocent men, leaving their families destitute? If it were not for the charity of their lairds, they would both be begging on the streets now—or worse!"

"I had tae restore the family honor!" Alan shouted. "Not so long ago, aboot five or six generations, the Bruce family wis a lot better off than it is now, an' we had a fair wee bit o land. We were increasin' oor name an' oor riches.

"Then the MacEwans an' the Dunbars came alang wi' a' their money an' started buyin a' the land and become the strongest families aroond. An' there wis no land left for us. Then there wis ane wee bit left, nae mair than a mile square, an' the twa faimlies started fightin' ower it! They both started grazin' their animals on it an' put their shepherds there, an they started fightin' wi' each ither. You had ALL THAT LAND and fought for the last wee piece o' it!"

"Before ye knaw it the MacEwans an' the Dunbars where at war. The Bruces made sure they stayed at war, because if they didnae, they wid get thegither an' make an empire up here."

" We dinnae ask much. A' we want is the chance tae be a mair important clan than we are noo. The clan we used tae be."

"And poor Fergus was standing in your way?" Craig growled. "A man who had very little, and you wanted to take away the wee bit that he had. He had a family to support. WHAT KIND of a man are you?"

Alan was silent. He was not ashamed; he had said as much as he

needed to say, and his fate was now in Craig's hands.

Or so he thought. Craig would have already killed him. His fate was in Malle's hands.

"What about your ancestor, Mungo Bruce?" Malle demanded. "He must have been furious when Isobell spurned him in favor of another man."

Alan sighed. "Tis said that he put the fear o'God intae a servant there an' she poisoned the MacEwan lassie, an' she confessed it on her deathbed," he replied sulkily. "Whit are ye gaunnae dae wi' me noo?"

Craig pushed the sword closer to his neck and a few drops of blood started coming down Alan's throat. "Speak the truth if you want to spend your life in prison and not be a corpse right here, right now."

"Me father told me-" but paused while being in great discomfort under Craigs sword. Craig did not give him any space, but only a look full of hate, straight in the eyes. Trying not to move an inch and breathing carefully, he continued. "Me father had a' ways been proud aboot how my ancestor killed Isobel and stopped yer families from uniting."

Malle put her hand in her mouth and tears started coming out of her eyes.

"If that had happened the Bruces would have perished long ago. "

Craig knew the truth now and had to hear no more. He moved his sword up and Alan closed his eyes and turned his head away. But Malle stopped Craig's sword from coming down.

"Craig, please do not kill him," she begged. "He is unarmed now, and it would be murder. I know he is a killer, but two wrongs do not make a right, and you will not lower yourself to his level. We should bring him back to your castle to stay in the dungeon until he is tried. Does he have a wife and family?"

"A wife and a son." Craig looked down at her and sighed. "You are an angel," he said softly, then he suddenly he howled in pain.

He had looked at Malle and taken his attention away from Alan for one moment. That was all that was needed for Alan to whip out his

dagger and stab Craig in the foot!

For a moment, Craig was too stunned to move, then he bent down to pull out the dagger but could not get it free in time; Alan was able to retrieve his sword.

He was in the act of sweeping it down on Craig's head when Malle had rushed over and pulled the knife out of Craig's foot, allowing him to deflect the stroke. Craig stood up and took a mighty swipe at Alan, but he ducked under it, then lunged at Craig with the point of his weapon aimed straight at his chest. Wounded as he was, Craig still managed to step out of Alan's way, then he held his sword out sideways.

There was no more time to play, Craig would not risk again and now Malle could not save Alan Bruce.

Without time to slow down Craig charged towards Alan. In the heat of the battle, his foot seemed to function as if it was not wounded. One, two, three strikes. Alan managed to put his sword against Craigs but the last hit was so strong that took his sword out of his hands. Alans eyes opened wide and in a brief moment he looked at Craig begging him not to kill him.

Craig's blade was sharp and hard enough to cut through a wooden shield without stopping. Craig moved the sword with his powerful hands without thinking twice and it bit into the flesh of Alan's neck and clove through it as if it were butter.

Malle gave a shriek as Alan Bruce's head fell to the floor with a thud, spouting blood.

She ran to Craig, who had sat down on the ground pushing his thumbs over the hole that the dagger had made in his foot. She fetched his cloak, tore strips from the hem, then wound them around his foot as tightly as she could. Only then did she allow herself to weep. She cried and cried, saying his name over and over while he held her, rocking her like a little child. His foot was throbbing with pain, but he ignored it, comforted by her embrace as he buried his face in her beautiful dark hair.

At last her sobs began to ease, then stopped altogether. She lay back on the carpet of pine needles and wiped the tears from her eyes with her fingertips.

“Are you alright, Malle?” he asked anxiously.

“I am fine,” she replied, giving him a watery smile. “Can you ride?”

He groaned, remembering the pain. “I think so, but you will have to help me.”

Then he gazed at her for a moment, seeing the beauty of the long hair, the beautiful eyes and the full pouting lips, the womanly breasts and tiny waist. He had known how he felt about her for a long time, but now he was absolutely sure of one thing: he could not live without her. He was kneeling on the ground, about to get up, when the words came, unbidden, out of his mouth.

“Malle MacEwan,” he said huskily, kissing her hand, “will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

For a moment, she was stunned with disbelief, then she threw her arms around his neck.“Yes, Craig, I will!” she replied joyfully. She had been hoping to be his since the moment she saw him. And now she knew she could trust him. Most of all because she felt it in her bones. This man was made for her. And she was made for him.

“You are everything to me Craig. But...what will our parents think?”

Recovering

"Thank you, thank you Malle!" he said fervently, and his face was lit up with happiness for a moment before clouding over with pain again. "We can worry about our parents later. At this moment all I want to do is get home." He looked very pale and tired. He glanced up at the darkening sky, then he sighed and gave her a weary smile. "At least we know the truth about the feud, and that Fergus was innocent. I am glad to hear that, and to know that his family still has its land."

"Alan was a cruel man," she agreed. "But he was too cowardly to take on a strong man. Look what happened when he did." She looked at the maimed body, which she had covered with her cloak, and shivered.

"I will have some men come to clear this mess up," Craig said, with disgust in his voice. "Unless the wolves and foxes get it first. Still, Alan might have been a scoundrel, but he has answered many questions, Malle, and now we can right many wrongs."

"Yes," she said sadly, "we know who killed Isobell now." She was looking down at her hands, in which she was idly twisting a leaf.

He tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes, smiling. "You have eyes the color of sage leaves," he whispered as he kissed her again.

"And yours are the color of the sea on a stormy day." She smiled and pushed him away gently. "I found a few letters, and more entries in Isobell's diaries. I was coming to show you. We can look through them together later."

Craig looked up at the sky, which was darkening with every second.

"I think we had better go home, Malle, or back to my home, which

will soon be yours." He smiled.

"I cannot wait," she replied.

She joined her hands under his unhurt foot and hoisted him up with as much strength as she could muster as he scrambled into the saddle.

Malle had trained Arthur to kneel on command, and it would have been easier for Craig to ride the big horse, but he would not tolerate any rider but Malle. Now, it was an easy matter for her to sit astride him as he stood up, and they went back to Dunbar Castle at a slow walk. As well as his sore foot, Craig had several sword cuts, bruises, and grazes, and Malle had the same as well as a whole head of luxuriant hair in which thousands of pine needles were embedded.

"You look like a haystack," Craig told her, smiling painfully as he tried to put a little humor into the situation.

"Thank you," she replied dryly. "You look very fetching too."

Then they laughed, but Malle suddenly thought of what they had left behind. "At least your head is still attached to your body." She sounded sad. "I know that he was out of his mind and a killer, but his was still a human life."

"Do not try to make me feel any worse than I do already, Malle." He sighed. "It was kill or be killed."

"I know, love," she replied, leaning over to squeeze his hand. "And if you had not been there to save me I would not be here now."

"And if you had not pulled the knife out of my foot, I would not be here either," he replied. "So our scores are even, my darling."

They ambled wearily back to the castle, but when they got there, Malle found that she did not have the strength to dismount from Arthur, and one of the stable hands had to lift her down.

Craig felt ashamed that he could not help her, but he was in so much pain that he could hardly walk, and had to be helped to a bedroom on the ground floor of the castle so that he could be tended to.

Malle, who had not recovered from her first attack before being subjected to a second one, was helped to another room and put to bed

before passing out.

Craig's foot was washed with wine and bandaged, then Jessie, the wise woman, gave him some poppy milk for the pain. But before he slept he had to know about Malle.

"How is she?" Craig asked anxiously. "Is she in pain?"

"We hae gied her a wee bit milk o' the poppy, M'laird," Jessie answered, "an' washed her wi' wine. She isnae any worse than you are! Now go tae sleep."

Reassured, Craig did as he was bidden.

~

When they got back from the horse fair, Margaret was excited to show Malle the beautiful little dappled gray mare she had just bought. Malle loved horses, and went for a ride on a daintier one now and again. Margaret wanted her advice on the choice of a name. Although Malle chose to ride on a huge beast like Arthur, she would not say no to a ride on a daintier mount. However, Margaret had purchased the little palfrey for herself, and she knew that they were going to treasure each other for a long time.

Margaret went through to the parlor, expecting to see her daughter there, then to her bedroom and the library. She tried her bedroom, where the sheets were still rumpled from her night's sleep, but she was not there either. Eventually she thought of the secret little room and entered it, calling out Malle's name, but there was no sign of her there or anywhere else. It was a very big castle, she thought, but it was very unlikely that she would be wandering amongst the maze of bedrooms in the east and west wings. There were eighty of them, although fifty were occupied by servants.

Margaret hurried out into the stables where she found Malcolm. "Have you seen Malle?" she asked fearfully. "I cannot find her anywhere."

"She is not here...wait." He walked along the stable block, looking for Arthur. When he saw that the big horse was not there, he strode back to Margaret, his face thunderous. "Arthur has gone," he growled. "She

is battered, bruised, and bleeding. What on earth would make her go out in that state?"

Margaret thought for a moment before light dawned in her eyes. "Kenny," she said, frowning, "I hope I am wrong, but I can think of one person she might be with."

"Who?" Kenneth frowned.

"Craig Dunbar," Margaret replied, frowning worriedly. "Something inside me tells me that she loves him."

"There has not been a match between a Dunbar and a MacEwan for two hundred years! Are you insane? I will not allow that!" Kenneth almost spluttered on his ale.

"I did not speak of marriage my dear," Margaret protested. "But she is a lovely young girl, and he is a big handsome man, and I saw the way they looked at each other. Have you not noticed? I think she might be with him."

"No, I have not noticed," Kenneth replied. " And I am sure she is not with him! WHY would she be with him Margaret?." He stroked his beard and bit his lip, a sure sign that he was anxious. "She could be anywhere! I am taking some guards and going out to look for her!" He swallowed the last of his ale and was about to stride out of the door when a maidservant came in with a letter on a tray.

"Who brought it?" he asked as he slit the seal open.

"A priest, M'laird," she replied. "A wee auld man, but he left as soon as he drapped it aff."

"With a kind face?" Margaret asked. The young woman nodded. "Father John."

Kenneth was scanning the message. "It's from Malcolm Dunbar. He says:

Laird and Lady MacEwan,

Your daughter is at my estate recovering from a fall from her horse. She is not seriously hurt and is in good hands. I have instructed my guards to let

you come and see her at your convenience.

Regards,

Laird Malcolm Dunbar

“I told her that horse was too big for her!” Margaret growled.

“How?...What?...We must go at once.” Kenneth was decisive, and impatient. “Malcolm Dunbar may be a good man, Margaret, and his son may have honorable intentions towards our daughter, but then again they may not. We will go to see them at once.”

Margaret nodded, then went to fetch some more clothes for Malle. When she was ready, she came down to see her husband standing by the window looking out, tapping his feet nervously. It was the dark of the moon, and there was not a light to be seen anywhere.

“We will have to go slowly,” he observed, “and take lanterns. It is but two miles, but it will feel more like five.”

Margaret nodded. She was trembling already, and her eyes were glittering with unshed tears. Malle was her only child, and she felt helpless.

Kenneth wrapped his arms around her. “Hush, wee darling,” he whispered. “We will be there soon, and she will be well.” He only hoped he was right.

Lairds and Ladies

The next morning, having slept like the dead under the influence of a generous dose of poppy milk, Craig woke up "like a bag of cats" as Jessie was wont to say when he was in a bad mood. He almost asked if he could have his foot chopped off, since he imagined that it might be less agonizing than what he was going through at that moment. Jessie had washed it in wine and smeared it liberally with honey, then she had bandaged it right up to his ankle with so much bandage that it looked as if his foot had swollen up to three times its normal size.

"Do you really have to do that?" he grumbled.

"Naw, young master," she replied sharply. "Only if ye wid like tae keep yer fit. I could jist let it go black an' fa' aff."

Craig laughed. "I am just a bit sore, Jessie," he said, wincing. "But I know what will help to cure me—a tumbler of usquebae!"

"Aye, cures everythin', that stuff!" Jessie muttered and shook her head. "I wid hate tae see ye gein' birth, then, M'laird." Then she laughed heartily. The young laird was one of the few toffs she could laugh with, and she was not in awe of him, because he could actually laugh at himself.

"How is Malle?" he asked anxiously. "Is she badly injured?"

"Naw, M'laird," Jessie replied, "dinnae fash yersel'. She has a fine big bump on the heid, cuts an' grazes everywhere, bit she willnae die. She should rest."

"May I see her?" he pleaded.

Jessie sighed. "I cannae stop ye but the quickest thing tae cure the lass

is rest."

"What about love?" he asked, smiling mischievously.

"I knew it!" Jessie laughed. "I knew ye were smitten!"

"But she is a MacEwan, and I am a Dunbar," he sighed.

"Naw, M'laird,"—Jessie shook her head firmly—"you are a man an' she is a wummin. Like Adam an' Eve."

He smiled at her. "I hated her the first time I saw her." He laughed. "I have never met such a ball of fire before, and she is so small. I just want to look after her."

"Then you are a good man, young master," Jessie replied. "An' that young wummin will be a good wife. I can aye tell."

"You are a grand lady, Jessie," he remarked, smiling. "Now I am going to see my beloved."

Yer beloved is a lucky young lassie, Jessie thought as she watched him limping out.

~

Malle was asleep, her cheek pillowed on her hands, when Craig did his best to creep into her room. She was smiling a little, as if dreaming about something pleasant, and he watched her pale countenance, with its pattern of bruises and scratches, wishing he could take them away.

It was such a beautiful face, he thought, with her long dark lashes, full lips, and sweeping dark eyebrows, and he had the urge to put his head down on the pillow to be closer to her, but he resisted the impulse in case he woke her up. He contented himself with stroking her cheek with his fingertips and whispering endearments to her.

He had been there for no more than a few minutes before her eyelids fluttered open and her eyes looked straight into his.

"Good morning," he murmured, kissing her softly.

"Am I dreaming?" she asked, smiling at him sleepily. "Are you really here?"

“Remember our adventure yesterday?” he reminded her. “This is my home, and you are here to heal.”

She passed her hand over her eyes. “The sword fight—oh, God, Craig. That was the worst thing that has ever happened to me. His body?”

“I have sent some men out to collect it, and Father Brown will bury it,” he replied. “And are you still going to marry me?”

She ran her hand down his face, loving the scratchy texture of his beard. “I would never marry anyone else but you,” she whispered. “On one condition.”

At once he was overcome with anxiety. “Anything, my love.”

“You must trim your beard!” she said sternly, and they both began to laugh.

He kissed her hand. “For you, I would shave off every hair on my head,” he said fondly. “Consider it done!”

Malle sighed with relief, and just at that moment her parents arrived. Margaret dashed over to see her daughter, then flung her arms around her and hugged her tightly. Malle groaned with pain as her bruised ribs were pressed against her mother’s body. Margaret, hearing this, gave a shocked gasp and let her go.

“Look at you, Malle!” she cried. “Did you not have enough injuries without adding more?”

“I’m fine, Mammy,” she replied wearily. “Please do not fuss.”

Kenneth came to lean over and kiss her. “Did Arthur do this to my daughter?” he growled. “I am going to do something about that creature!”

“No, Paw!” She sounded angry. “Another horse came out in front of him and he reared just enough to throw me off. It was not his fault.”

“How are you feeling?” Margaret asked anxiously.

“I am well enough, Mammy.” Malle was beginning to become annoyed. Her headache was beginning to return now that she was being assailed with questions, and she lay back on her pillow with her

eyes closed, wishing everyone would go away. She noticed that Craig was gone too, probably supposing that Malle would want some privacy to talk to her parents.

“Why are you on this side of the Cut, Malle?” Kenneth asked, mystified. “How many times do you need to be told not to come here?”

Malle turned her head away, closing her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was go into a detailed explanation of all Donnan’s letters and why she had to see Craig, and the ensuing battle in which a man was killed.

At that moment however, salvation arrived in the form of Jessie, who came in bearing a strong cup of willow bark tea. She curtsied to Laird and Lady MacEwan and greeted them politely, then bent down to feel Malle’s forehead.

“M’laird, Milady,” she said, “sometimes there is a wee bit o’ fever after a blow tae the head. The mistress needs her rest, but I will sit wi’ her, dinnae fash yersel’.”

Margaret looked doubtfully at Kenneth, but they could see the wisdom of Jessie’s words, so they each kissed Malle and turned to leave.

“I will be back to check on her soon,” Margaret warned.

“As ye wish, Milady,” Jessie replied, smiling at her kindly.

As soon as the door was closed, Malle opened one eye. “Is she gone?” she whispered.

“Aye,” Jessie replied briskly. “Noo dinnae get a’ excited,” she warned. “Ye’ve got a wee bit fever, but the tea should take care o’ that.”

Just then, Craig edged his way around the door. “Are you still not feeling well?” he asked, concerned.

“She has a fever,” Jessie said firmly. “An’ she is gaun’ back tae sleep. I jist chased her maw an’ paw oot the door. Go on, get oot!”

“A fever?” Craig asked, frowning. “Is she alright?”

“I am fine, I only have a headache,” she replied. “I am going to rest

for a little while and then join you. Give yourself peace, lovie. I will be down soon."

He kissed her softly. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too." She smiled. "I always will."

Didnae realize he wis as smitten as a' that! Jessie thought in amazement. This would make wonderful gossip with her friends for a rainy evening!

~

Craig limped downstairs to find his father and the MacEwans sitting beside the fire drinking spiced ale and giving every appearance that they were enjoying each other's company. His father, not usually so outgoing, seemed to be going out of his way to charm Margaret, but although she was trying to be polite, he could see that she was anxious, and her mind was far away. Kenneth had a protective arm around her.

He watched the three of them for a moment, wondering why the feud had gone on for so long. It seemed that only Isobell and Donnan had tried to put an end to it, but this time it would be Malle and Craig's turn, and they would not just try, but succeed.

Craig drew in a deep breath and limped into the room, smiling broadly. "Good evening, M'laird, Milady," he said politely, bowing over Margaret's hand and kissing it. "It is so good to see you again." He thought briefly that Donnan must have felt like this when he entered the lion's den.

Margaret would have begged him to tell her everything, but Kenneth gently restrained her by squeezing her arm.

"Are you ready to tell us what happened?" Kenneth asked. "While Malle is sleeping?"

Craig sighed. "It is not a pretty tale," he began, "so yes, let me tell you while she is not here. I doubt she will want to relive it. I know you have been wondering what happened to us. Fortunately neither of us is badly injured, but it could have been much worse. Alan Bruce is

dead—wait, Father." He held up his hand as Malcolm tried to speak. "He is the cause of all the unrest that has been going on here."

"I would rather sit with Malle for a while," Margaret announced. "Kenneth can tell me later." She left the room hastily.

"This injury of mine was caused by a knife being driven into my foot," Craig began, "but it is not as bad as it looks. But Jessie, who put the bandage on, always says that if a job is worth doing it is worth doing well, and here is the result!" He had tried to begin on a lighthearted note but neither of the lairds smiled. "I am going to have to go back two hundred years to get to the beginning of the story, so I would be grateful if neither of you interrupted. It began with Isobell MacEwan and Donnan Dunbar…"

He went on to tell the story in as much detail as he could, and ended at the very moment when he and Malle had ridden into Dunbar Castle. "...the rest you know," he ended, then went to get himself a tumbler of whisky. Reliving the events of the day had brought everything back vividly, and he felt rather shaky inside.

"Your ordeal sounds absolutely terrifying," Malcom remarked, his eyes wide with horror. "Poor Isobell...as for Alan Bruce, the wolves are welcome to him. You did well to kill him Craig."

"Craig-" said Kenneth with trembling voice "You saved Malle's life! If you had not been there she would have been dead. I can never thank you enough." Kenneth's voice was husky with emotion. He loved his daughter more than anything. "We will spend the rest of our lives repaying you."

"I could not have let Malle die. I could not let that happen," Craig answered. "No man could."

Malcolm looked at Kenneth. "Perhaps...you would both like to stay for dinner? We are quite plain eaters, but you are welcome to whatever we have."

Kenneth thought for a second.

"We will be pleased to," Kenneth replied. "I will be honored to sit with the man who saved my daughter's life."

Suddenly Kenneth realised he was feeling very stupid. And blind. It was as if the answer was in front of him all this time and he ignored it. These two men he hated… they did not actually seem like bad people.

All these years of fighting were based on lies.

Their Blessing

Margaret found Malle asleep when she went in to see her, with the wise woman sitting with her. She was sewing what looked like a little baby garment.

"How is she?" Margaret whispered.

"Sleepin' like a babby, Milady," Jessie answered. "She will be fine in a wee while."

Margaret sat down and took out her rosary beads, then began to pray silently for Malle's recovery. She finished telling the beads then looked at Jessie's sewing. "Who is the dress for?" she asked, as she fingered the little white garment.

"My newest grandchild," Jessie replied, smiling. "My fifth."

"You are so fortunate!" Margaret laughed enviously. "I hope to be a grandmother one day, but I doubt it will be soon."

Maybe sooner than ye think, Milady! Jessie thought.

Just then, Malle's eyelids fluttered open and she looked at Margaret. She smiled drowsily as her mother hugged her.

"I had better get up if we are going home," she said groggily.

"I think you are staying here tonight," Margaret said, kissing her forehead. "And so am I."

"I want to get up and eat dinner," Malle said suddenly as she threw back her blankets. "I am starving!"

"Eat it in bed, Mistress," Jessie pleaded.

"I am fine, Jessie," Malle said stubbornly.

Against Jessie's dire warnings, Margaret pinned up her hair, then Malle put on a plain gray dress and shawl. She had no one to impress anymore; Craig was hers. She smiled as she looked into her polished bronze hand mirror and decided that she looked acceptable.

Her mother was more enthusiastic. Margaret smiled and hugged her. "Darling, you would look good in a sack!" She laughed.

"Mind," Jessie warned, "if ye dinnae feel well, back up here wi' ye. Between you an' thon Craig, ye've got my heart roastit!"

Malle laughed. Jessie came out with the most expressive sayings: "A bag of cats" when a person was grumpy, "My heart roasted" when she was very worried. However, she was still the wisest wise woman Malle had ever met, and the sweetest.

When they walked into the parlor Kenneth rushed up to hug her again.

"Paw, don't squeeze me!" she moaned, pushing her father away.

"Sorry, darling, I forgot." He looked into Malle's eyes, noting the bruise that was turning a painful shade of purple. "You have been through the wars, have you not? Craig has been telling us the whole story. You are lucky to be alive!"

"Indeed I am." Malle took a glass of wine from Malcolm and sipped it, but when she raised her eyes again she was looking, not at her father, but at Craig.

Margaret followed the direction of her eyes and understood at once, and Craig was gazing at Malle with such love that it was impossible not to see it.

"Mammy, Paw," she said softly, not taking her eyes off Craig, "this is why I was coming here. To see the man I love."

"Do you feel the same, Craig?" Kenneth asked in amazement.

Craig nodded. "Malle is the love of my life," he replied as he bent down to kiss her softly. She was so small that her head fit neatly under his chin, and she allowed him to hold her gently while she sighed and closed her eyes in sheer contentment. Of all the places in the world,

this was where she most wanted to be.

Kenneth looked on in amazement, then turned to his wife. “Did you know, Margaret?” he asked.

“I knew that they were fond of each other.” She shook her head in

disbelief. “But not like this!”

Malcolm was smiling roguishly. “I knew that when this big lump could not keep a smile off his face, or his mind on anything for longer than a few moments, that he was smitten with someone!”

“Come and sit down,” Craig said, smiling as he guided Malle into the dining room. “Malle and I have some things we would like to say to you.”

Craig limped and Malle walked beside him as they went in to eat. Malle started to laugh. “Craig, my love, can you not get Jessie to unwind a few hundred yards of that bandage? You look as though you have a club foot.”

“Jessie is a small woman, is she not?” he asked.

Malle frowned. “Yes, smaller than I am. Why?”

“And are you not a small woman too?” he suggested.

“Yes.” She was deeply puzzled now. “What does this mean?”

“Small women have power over me,” he answered with a perfectly straight face.

“Then I am exercising my power and telling you to remove those bandages!” She laughed, and he joined in.

“It is going to be wonderful being married to you,” Craig murmured, then he looked up at their parents and got to his feet awkwardly, feeling a little self-conscious. “We have something to ask you,” he announced. “This is going to be a bit of a shock for you all. Would anyone object if Malle and I got married?”

There was a collective gasp, and complete silence for a moment as Malcolm, Margaret, and Kenny thought through the implications of this.

“If you do not allow us to marry,” Craig went on, without waiting for an answer, “we will do it anyway. We just wanted your blessing, because we can go somewhere else to do it, where no one knows us.”

Margaret looked at her daughter and saw the light of determination in her eyes. *She would do it, too. She really loves him.*

“And you will not see your grandchildren,” Malle pointed out.

Margaret’s heart leapt into her throat. “You are not with child?” Her eyes were wide with fear.

“No Mammy,” Malle replied frowning. “Give yourself peace. Craig and I have always acted honorably.”

“But there will be grandchildren, Milady,” Craig said firmly, looking lovingly at Malle.

“And you will marry without our blessing, whatever we say?” Malcolm asked.

“We will, M’laird,” Malle assured him. “As soon as we can.”

Malcolm, Margaret, and Kenneth looked at each other.

“I am not sure about this,” Margaret said softly. She stood up and Kenneth followed her to a small table under the window, then Malcolm joined them.

~

Kenneth began “So we all know this in imposib—”

“I think we should give them our blessing,” Malcom said, his voice firm and determined. “I have come to know Malle a little, and I can see that she is a very determined young woman. I know that Craig is determined too, but you can see that he adores her. They are asking us out of respect. They really do not need our blessing.”

“But she is still so young…our families…we do not even know each other. What will people say? Our clans are enemies!” Margaret was almost weeping.

She was mainly afraid that Kenneth would never agree.

“Margaret.” Kenneth took her shoulders and turned her to face him. He paused and looked at her for a moment. “I do not want to lose my daughter. The thought of losing her would kill me. This marriage is not what I hoped for but you said it yourself. Malle has deep feelings for Craig. I am afraid they are not gampbling. If we do not allow this marriage I do not know if she will obey us. And if she does, we will not be happy as we are now. She will be resentful. ”

He took a deep breath. “But I also do not know if our people can accept that. We have been enemies with the Dunbars for so long...”

Margaret looked over to where Craig and Malle were tenderly looking into each other’s eyes, and it was clear at that moment that Malle would do anything for that man.

~

“If we give our blessing,” Kenneth said, as they all walked back to the dining table, “you know that this will mean the end of the feud. What will people say?” He sounded terrified.

“Indeed,” Malcolm agreed, nodding. “The Dunbars and the MacEwans at peace? It is not natural! Our people will not accept it, Craig. What will you do?”

Then Craig replied, “Shall we try it? This partnership will do a great deal of good not only to us but to our people as well. Working together we could achieve a great deal. Yes, it will be strange at first, but when people have their children fed and their houses prospering, they will forget all about the hate.”

Malcolm thought about this for a moment. “Indeed,” he said thoughtfully, stroking his beard. “I would like to see the fine ram you were telling me about Kenneth.”

“And you have the great bull who has sired hundreds of fine calves,” Kenneth agreed. “We could build up two fine herds between us. Our people will surely not oppose that.”

There was one more moment of hesitation from Kenneth. He looked at Craig and he knew that him and Malcom were both already old. The

new Laird had decided their fate and he had a strong woman by his side. The responsibility was now on their hands.

“Why not Malcom?” he replied feeling like a huge burden was lifted off of his shoulders.

Both lairds had an excuse for each other, as they did it for their children. And they also had an excuse for their people. The clans would be much more powerful if they cooperated and most people would forget all about the freud if that meant better prospects and food for their children. For the ones that were still unsure there was Craig. Now with more power under his hand there would be hard to find a man to oppose him.

They reached across the table and for the first time in over two hundred years, a MacEwan and a Dunbar joined hands in friendship.

~

“Do you get the feeling that we are being regarded as livestock?” Malle laughed as they sat in the parlor drinking mulled wine before going to bed. “A ram and ewe breeding the next generation?”

Malcolm was giving Kenneth and Margaret a tour of the castle, but Craig and Malle were glad to be alone for a while. She was leaning her head on his shoulder, and the nightmare events of the past few days were so distant that they seemed to have happened to someone else.

“Hmmm…” Craig thought for a moment, then laughed. “Perhaps, but you cannot blame them, Malle. So many new opportunities have opened up for all of us now, especially since our fathers have started talking about building a bridge over the Cut. The future is bright for all of us.”

“And our children,” she murmured, then yawned.

“And a young Isobell must come as soon as possible!” Craig declared. “I am not a patient man!”

“What if it’s a Donnan?” Malle asked, laughing.

“Then we will send him back,” Craig murmured, laughing. “Come

here, you gorgeous woman. I need to kiss you again or I will die." Then he folded his arms around her and kissed her so gently it was as though a feather were blowing across her lips. He smoothed his big rough hand over her silky hair and she sighed into his mouth.

When he tried to draw away she put her hand on the back of his head and pulled him back again, and was rewarded with a moan of pleasure. This time it was deep, passionate, and fierce; their tongues stroking, lips caressing until they were both breathless. When she finally let him go he shook his head in disbelief.

"When I first met you I thought you had a fiery temper." He laughed. "I didn't realize you had fiery lips too. My mouth is on fire!"

She giggled, and buried her head in his chest again, inhaling the warm musk of his skin which was better than any perfume she had ever smelled before.

Presently the lairds and Margaret came back and sat with them, and after two hundred years of hostility, the Dunbars and MacEwans were at last finding out about each other, realizing that they had many things in common which they had never known before. For example, Malcolm had a sister who was also called Margaret. "In fact," he laughed, "I have five sisters—Margaret, Mary, Minette, Maureen, and Mazey. And I am Malcolm, which is why Craig is not called Munro!"

"And what do you do in your free time?" Malcolm asked Kenneth.

"I play chess with Malle," he replied. "And I tell Malle stories as if she was still a little girl. And please forgive me, but they are mostly about how we defeated the Dunbars."

"She sat on his lap until two years ago!" Margaret laughed.

"Do not worry," Craig said, smiling down at Malle, "I heard the same ones about the MacEwans, but we will not tell them anymore. We will make happier ones. Is she a good chess player?" Craig asked, as if she were not there.

"Indeed she is," Kenneth answered proudly. "She wins most of our games." He smiled at his daughter.

"I will have to challenge her!" Craig was laughing, and Margaret

laughed too as she watched him and Malle together. It was quite obvious that they adored each other. Malle was everything to her, and the thought of giving her to a careless or cruel man terrified her. However, now that she had met Craig, Margaret needed no more reassurance. She had a feeling that the stories about the Dunbars would continue, but they would have a very different context.

The Letter

Malle, despite sleeping during the day, found herself utterly exhausted that night, and fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. She was slumbering so deeply that when Craig crept into her room, having removed all but a tiny piece of the bandage on his foot, she did not even stir.

He knelt by her bed to watch her sleep, her face silvered by the moonlight streaming through the window. Knowing that she was near, he had been unable to stay away, and now he took her hand from where it lay on the coverlet and kissed it.

We will be together soon, my Malle, he thought, smiling.

Presently, however, she said softly, "I know you are there, Dunbar." Then she smiled and opened her eyes. "Have you come to talk to me?"

He was surprised. "You told me you were a heavy sleeper, so I came to look at you," he whispered. "The way I did yesterday. I like watching you sleep."

"I am, and you did not make a sound. I felt you here." Malle suddenly pulled the covers back. "Come in for a moment, I want to talk to you."

He hesitated, frowning. "If anyone comes in—"

"No one will come in," she reassured him. "Anyway, we are only talking, and we are betrothed."

He needed no second bidding, but climbed into bed and slid under the covers with her, then took her hands and held them to his chest.

"I could stay here forever," he whispered as he nestled beside her in a cocoon of warmth and comfort.

She giggled, then ran her fingers down his beard as her face became solemn again. “Do you think it is fanciful to believe that Donnan and Isobell were somehow guiding us?” she asked. “Do you think they wanted us to put right what they could not? Mungo Bruce killed Isobell in the past for marrying a Dunbar, and Alan tried to make sure that history repeated itself. Perhaps they have finally managed to get retribution for the wrong that was done to them by killing a Bruce and marrying two enemies.”

Craig thought for a moment. “I think that if that were the case,” he mused, “they would give us a sign.”

“What kind of sign?” Malle asked.

Craig shook his head. “I have no idea. Perhaps you are right, you are being fanciful! Do you not think it more likely that we just fell in love?”

Suddenly he pulled her to him and gave her a long, smoldering kiss.

“No,” she gasped, as she pushed him away. “Not yet, my love.”

“Give yourself peace, Malle,” he said tenderly. “I was just slaking my thirst. I have wanted to do that ever since the last kiss!” Then he slipped out from underneath the sheets and left, turning to smile at her as he closed the door behind him.

~

After breakfast the next day, Malle took out the letters and diary from her saddlebag and showed them to Craig. Malcolm was looking over his shoulder and was intrigued when he saw them. His eyes lit up when he read the entry from Isobell’s diary and the letter from Mungo to Isobell.

“And as we now know, Mungo killed Isobell, or got some poor girl to do it,” he said, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “The story goes that he did not live long after that. I have a notion that there is a letter, or maybe several letters to Donnan Dunbar somewhere here. He was a frequent letter writer, so I have heard, even though paper was quite hard to come by in those days.”

Malcolm stood, thinking for a moment, then turned decisively to Craig. “Well, big man, since you are doing nothing more profitable today, I nominate you to begin the search!” he said generously, as if bestowing a great gift.

“Where would you like me to start?” Craig asked, bewildered. “Father, there are seventy bedrooms in this castle!”

“You are a sensible fellow,” Malcolm said comfortably, patting his son’s shoulder. “I am sure you can find it.”

“Where are you going?” Craig asked, frowning.

Kenneth turned to Craig, grinning. “Your father and I are going to celebrate our new friendship with a spot of rabbit hunting!” he announced.

“And a wee bit of usquebae!” Malcolm added, holding up a flask of whisky. Then they left, laughing, joking, and punching each other like two little boys playing.

“Oh, my goodness!” Margaret said, putting her hand over her mouth and laughing. “What have we started?”

“They have gone back to their second childhood, Mammy!” Malle suggested, smiling and shaking her head.

“If they ever left it,” Craig remarked grimly.

~

Despite its size, there were not many places in the castle that were unfamiliar to Craig. He searched storerooms, bedrooms, and cupboards, and uncovered dozens of mouse nests, and spiders by the thousands, but there was no letter anywhere.

At last, exhausted, he went back to the parlor for a drink of ale, only to find Margaret and Malle reading a large sheet of paper which had been carefully preserved in a slim leather folio.

They looked up when he entered, and Malle held the paper out to him, her face a picture of sorrow. He frowned as he took it from her. “Is this what I think it is?” he demanded.

“I believe so,” Malle replied quietly.

“What is wrong, my love?” Craig asked, alarmed.

“Read the letter,” Malle instructed.

Craig began to read, and felt the sadness coming off the paper as if it was a physical thing, like a mist that had been trapped inside the folio, passed down through the years and only let loose when it was opened. He fancied he could smell it.

Donnan had written to Jamie in Thurso, telling him about Isobell’s death and the funeral, and asking his permission to join him in the Monastery of St Kentigern.

Dear Jamie,

When I saw my darling girl in the coffin, it was as though God’s light was shining through her. All the cares of the world had left her and her beautiful face was serene and untroubled. She looked peaceful as I had never before seen her in life, and there was a trace of a smile around her lips. I could almost imagine that she was still alive, were it not for the pallor of her skin, which was as white as milk. I only cried when I saw the coffin lid closing, thinking of my darling Isobell lying in the cold ground unable to get out of that box. I almost wished I was with her.

My dear brother, I feel as if my heart has been ripped out. I cannot go on without her. Is there a place for me in the monastery? I do not want to stay here where she died. There are too many memories of her.

Your loving brother,

Donnan

The reply was written on the bottom of the same sheet of paper:

Dear Donnan,

I have explained your situation to the Abbot Peter and he will be happy to welcome you as a lay brother. I am distraught to hear about Isobell’s death. She was a wonderful soul, and I cannot imagine your grief.

However, you are both in my thoughts and prayers, and you can console yourself with knowing that she is now with God. Come as soon as you wish.

Your loving brother,

Jamie

Margaret read the letter again, then nodded. “We read in Isobell’s grandmother’s diary that the family all mistrusted Donnan, but it was so obvious that he loved her. Everyone said so at the time, and it has come down to us over hundreds of years. Now we know that Mungo did it—we will not count the poor servant girl, since she was another one of Mungo’s victims—this makes it even sadder. He loved Isobell so much that he could not live without her. The poor man.”

“That is so sad.” Malle sighed. “He died of a broken heart, and yet I read in one of the diaries that he did not look sad at all, which is why so many of the family suspected him of killing her.”

“Some people are just made that way, Malle. They cannot show their feelings. Who knows if he wept when no one could see him? We should not judge.”

“I never did.” Then she thought of something. “There are no Bruces anymore, are there Craig?”

“There is Alan Bruce the Younger,” he replied, “but he is only twelve years old and nothing like his father. In fact, since Alan used to beat him, he is quite glad that he is dead, and I am taking him under my wing. His wife is glad too. He beat three babies out of her. We want no more like Alan the Elder here. Even before he died, I began to hear all kinds of tales about him, and I did not believe them. I saw what I wanted to see, I suppose, but when he attacked us I realized all the stories were true. A fine judge of character is Craig Dunbar!” His voice was bitter.

“He was your family’s friend for years, my love,” she pointed out. “Of course you thought the best of him. That is natural, and it makes you a better man, not a worse one.” She looked up into the deep dark gray eyes and felt herself melt inside.

“You make me a better man,” Craig said huskily. “And I cannot wait for you to be my wife.” Then he cupped her face in his and kissed her with all the passion he possessed, glad that he would not have to wait much longer.

When it was over, Malle was breathless and her eyes were bright. “You know, I think I love you now as much as I hated you when we first met!”

He laughed and hugged her as tightly as he dared with her bruised ribs. “Do you have to go home tonight?” he asked sadly. “Please stay another day.”

“I have to get back,” she whispered.

“Why?” He sounded quite sad.

“Because Mammy and I have a wedding dress to make!” she reminded him.

Just then the door opened and the two lairds lurched through it, looking distinctly the worse for wear. They were both smiling broadly and had their arms around each other. Kenneth held up a brace of rabbits, and Malcolm had another two.

“Is there anything left of the whisky?” Craig asked suspiciously.

“Not a drop,” Malcolm said proudly. “We drank all of it, didn’t we, Kenny?”

“Aye, Malky, we did!” Kenneth replied, laughing. In a moment they were both giggling like girls, and a few minutes later they fell asleep, sprawled inelegantly all over the couches.

“Oh, God!” Craig said, pretending to be horrified. “What kind of monsters have we created?”

“They look as though they have been friends forever,” Malle remarked. “It is good to see, but they will be very sorry in the morning. We will have to go and prepare the willow bark tea!”

Just then Margaret came back into the room. She took one look at the sleeping pair and made a strange growling noise that Malle had never heard her make before. She marched over to where Kenneth was lying

and slapped his face until he opened his eyes and looked into hers with a dazed, unfocused gaze.

“You’re drunk,” Margaret said in a voice that sounded like ground glass.

Kenneth said nothing, but gave her a bleary smile. Margaret stood up and put her hands on her hips, her face like a thundercloud.

“May we trespass on your hospitality again, Craig?” she asked, embarrassed.

“I was going to offer it,” he replied, smiling at her kindly. “I will see to these two creatures.”

“Thank you so much,” Margaret breathed. “I am going to kill him in the morning.”

“She has killed him so many times I have lost count,” Malle said dryly.

Craig put an arm around her shoulders. “At least one good thing has come out of it,” he remarked, grinning.

“And what is that?” Malle asked suspiciously.

“You are staying here tonight!” he cried in triumph.

The Wedding

Malle's dress was breathtaking, as everyone who saw it said. Margaret had spent weeks sewing it, and she did not stop until every stitch was perfect, and the gown fit Malle like a second skin. It was made of the lightest gray satin, and its pale color was a perfect foil for the river of dark hair that flowed down her back. The dress had a long train, and long fitted sleeves that ended in a point. The waist was high at the back and dropped into a flat point at the front, with pleats of fabric fanning out from underneath it. It had a modest round neckline, and Malle was glad of this, since she did not want her wedding gown to be too revealing.

The reason that Malle's hair was not tied up in its usual knot was that Craig had asked her to leave it loose, and since it was such a small request, she had agreed. She carried a bouquet of white heather, which was quite difficult to come by and was meant to bring good luck, and around her neck she wore a daisy chain like the ones she used to make as a child from the tiny white blossoms in the fields around the castle. It was a childlike innocent touch and Malle loved it. So did Margaret, who had suggested it.

Malle had finished her ensemble with some silver hanging earrings lent to her by her mother, and when she put them on her wedding finery was complete.

Margaret looked at her and almost burst into tears. "My little girl is leaving," she said hoarsely. "What am I going to do without you, Malle?"

Malle laughed and hugged her.

"Mammy, there are not enough hours in the day for you to do all the things you need to!" She laughed. "You will never be bored, I promise.

And we are not too far away—we can visit. Travel is safer now that there is no feud. And I am in love, Mammy. You have no idea how much I love Craig."

"I think I do," Margaret replied, as Malle's father walked in.

"Ready, love? You look ravishing, and I have never been so proud of you." His voice was thick with emotion as he hugged and kissed her. "Come on darling, your bridegroom awaits!"

~

Craig's hands were shaking. He had never been so nervous in all his life, and it was strange because he had been wanting this day to come for months. Now that it was here though, he thought of the enormity of what he was doing. He was entrusting his life and his happiness into the care of another, and he was taking on the responsibility of looking after her and their children—if they were blessed with any—forever. It was an enormous burden to shoulder, and it terrified him.

He tried to imagine himself with a baby in his arms. A little boy was usually preferred, but in their case they wanted a little Isobell. They had not discussed the name; it had just seemed right. He smiled at the thought of it, but it only brought home to him what he was doing even more forcefully.

This was the most important day of his life, and he prayed to God he could get through it without spilling his wine at Holy Communion or tripping over his own feet. All he wanted was to be safely married so that he could wrap his Malle in his arms and hold her close all night to protect her from any more Alan Bruces. As any man would, he wanted to possess her body, but the thought of holding her after loving her was glorious.

Just then, his father came in. He looked his son up and down, then smiled broadly. He was still a handsome man in his own right, tall and broad like his son, with just a few streaks of gray through his red hair, which he kept short.

"You look grand, my son," he said proudly, clapping Craig on the back. He stood back to look at him, and his eyes became a little moist.

“If only your mother was here,” he said sadly. Craig’s mother had been one of the many women who died in childbirth, and Malcolm Dunbar had never remarried because he had never found another woman to love.

“I wish it too, Father. I would love to have met her, but she will be looking down on us from heaven, will she not?”

“Aye.” His father wiped his eyes. “Look at me, acting like a maid!”

“I understand.” Craig put his arm around Malcolm’s shoulders. “If I lost Malle I would feel the same.”

“Then I hope you never do.” His father put a hand in his pocket and drew out a little chased silver box, which he gave to Craig. He opened it, and inside was a gold crucifix on a gold chain. It sparkled and winked in the sunlight, and Craig smiled and caught his breath at its beauty.

“From your mother,” he said, and his voice was very loving. “She knew she was dying and she made me buy it for you to give you on your wedding day. She wanted you to pass it on to your son or daughter when it fits them.”

He reached around Craig’s neck and fastened the chain so that the cross hung down to his chest, resting against the slight dusting of reddish hair.

Father and son hugged each other, then Malcolm said, “Time to go, Son.”

Craig nodded and took a deep breath, then he and Malcolm walked out to the chapel so Craig could meet his destiny.

~

When Craig turned around he could not believe his eyes. He had expected Malle to look pretty on her wedding day, but she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen. She smiled at him once then lowered her eyes modestly as her father put her hand into Craig’s. “Look after her,” he warned.

Malle stood by his side, then he turned to her and took her hand and whispered, “You are absolutely radiant, my Malle. I am the most fortunate man in the world.”

“And you are magnificent, Craig,” she replied. “No woman is happier than I am at this moment.”

For one perfect moment it seemed that there were just the two of them there, gazing into each other’s eyes and cocooned in love. Eventually they had to draw apart as the priest arrived—his old, seamed face radiant with joy.

They were being married at MacEwan Castle, but the ceremony was being conducted by Father John Baxter, at the request of the bridal couple.

After the blessing, he welcomed the congregation—who had come from both castles—to see the marriage: every last chambermaid, stable hand, and gardener was there, as well as tenant farmers and their wives. The chapel was simply too small, so they were having the nuptial Mass in the courtyard.

“Never in all my years as a priest has it given me so much pleasure to join a young couple in Holy Matrimony,” he said happily. “Why? Because not only are two souls and two families joining together, but an ancient wound is being healed. The MacEwans and the Dunbars will no longer be enemies but united in the best bond of all; the bond of love, as Craig and Malle say their vows and join their lives together forever. Let us pray.”

The Mass continued, but neither Craig nor Malle heard much of it until they came to the vows.

“Craig,” Father John invited, “as the provider and protector, please go first.”

Craig’s smile was infinitely loving as he looked at the woman who was his whole world. “Malle,” he began, “I adore you, but it has not always been so. When we first met we thought that we would be enemies, but somehow love crept up on us and brought us together, as we were meant to be. So today I pledge my life and all that I have to you, and I vow to love you and be faithful to you for the rest of my

days. Please tell me you will be my wife."

"I will be your wife, Craig," she replied, looking into his eyes and smiling. "For you are the only man I have ever loved, and the only one I could ever imagine walking beside on life's journey. You are the only man whose children I want to bear. There has never been anyone else for me, and there will never be. I swear to be a loving and faithful wife to you, and if we are blessed with children, the best mother I can be. Will you be my husband?"

"I will," he replied, his voice trembling with emotion. Then he slid the golden ring on her finger and they were married, and despite the solemnity of the ceremony, a great cheer went up from the assembled spectators.

The rest of the Mass could not pass quickly enough for them. Father Baxter, sensing their urgency, performed the rest of the ceremony a little more quickly than usual, and soon it was over. They then shared their first loving kiss as husband and wife.

Craig looked down into her eyes with their long black lashes as he caressed her cheek, and said, "Lady Malle Dunbar, I cannot wait to make you mine."

"And I cannot wait to be yours, Laird Craig Dunbar," she smiled lovingly.

"Then let us eat and be courteous to our guests for a while," he suggested, "then we can slip away. All I want to do is have you in my arms, all to myself in our bed."

"Then we want the same thing, Laird of mine." She laughed and kissed him, then they went into the throng of guests to be hugged, kissed, and congratulated by hundreds of eager guests. Everyone had been provided for, even the most humble of the servants, who had never eaten so well.

They had been very abstemious with their drinking, watering down their wine and taking only a little whisky, whereas the rest of the guests were becoming distinctly tipsy. After an hour or so, they saw their chance and slipped away. At the bottom of the staircase Craig swept Malle up in his arms and ran upstairs, carrying her in his arms

without apparent effort.

At the top he put her down. “This is your castle,” he observed. “Tell me where to go.”

She pointed in the direction of the bedroom and began to tug on his hand, but he stood still, laughing.

“What?” she asked, baffled.

“Well as long as we are standing here, this is as good a place as any for one of these,” he said, as his mouth swooped down on hers.

Malle clung to him, loving the warm sweet pressure of his lips moving on hers and the gentle invasion of his tongue as it stroked hers. It was heavenly, but all too soon it ended, and she took his hand and began to lead him to the room that had been prepared for their first night together. It was magnificent, and he looked around in awe.

The bed was made of richly carved mahogany, and the luster of the rich brown wood was repeated in the rust satin coverlet and fat pillows that rested on it. The hangings were a warm buttercream color which was echoed in the earthenware bowls of mountain avens, daisies, and heather perching on round mahogany tables scattered around the room.

There were hanging embroideries of horses and hounds, flowers and landscapes, and scenes of everyday life, and then Craig looked out of the window to Loch Erin, its navy blue waters ruffled by the breeze blowing in from the sea, which was a misty smudge on the horizon a few miles away.

He turned to her and put his arms around her waist, then gathered her into his arms with a deep sigh of satisfaction. “My lovely wife,” he whispered. “Alone at last. Do you know what I want to do first?”

“No,” she whispered, then she gave a nervous gulp of fear.

“I want to hold you, just hold you, till your fear is gone,” he said gently, looking into her eyes. “Because I know you are afraid.”

“I am...a little,” she admitted.

He turned her around and began to undo the laces at the back of her

dress until she was wearing only her chemise, then pulled the coverlet on the blanket back so that she could climb into bed. Once there, she pulled the bedclothes up to her chin and watched him unfolding his plaid and taking off the silver brooch that pinned it to his shoulder. Soon he was wearing nothing but his shirt. It reached the middle of his thighs, for which she was thankful, because she was not yet ready for the sight of his whole body.

He pulled back the covers and lay down beside her, then wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close so that she buried her face in the crook between his neck and shoulder. His flesh was warm and firm, and he smelled of lavender oil and his own natural musk, which was like perfume to her. It was like being in heaven, she thought, cocooned in warmth and love.

When he began to kiss and stroke her, she was no longer afraid, and when they came together at last he eased her past the pain to the ultimate pleasure beyond it. Afterward, they lay, sated with love, lost in the afterglow.

“Now you are mine,” he murmured, lost in her eyes. “I do not know what I did to deserve you, but you are, Malle Dunbar.”

“And you are mine.” She caressed the bristle on his cheek, relishing the ticklish rasp under her palm. “Oh, my love, I never realized it was possible to be so happy.”

“It is a revelation for me too,” he said in wonder. “And now that our families are friends, there is a bright future ahead.”

“Especially if we have children,” she murmured, her eyes twinkling.

“Hmmm…yes.” He smiled, then folded his arms around her and kissed her again. “Shall we make a little Isobell?”

She nodded happily. “And if we fail this time we can go on trying until we succeed!”

His eyes widened in mock horror. “You will kill me!” he said fearfully.

She giggled and kissed him softly. “But at least you will die with a smile on your face!”

~

The day after the wedding, Malle picked some mountain avens from the hillside just outside the castle gates. It was a bracing but sunny day, and she felt as though the sun was shining out of her. She was married, really married at last to the man of her dreams, and she knew in some mysterious way that it was Isobell and Donnan whom she had to thank.

When she got to the gravestone, which she had scrubbed with her own hands to restore it to its former pristine state, she kissed it. “Thank you, Isobell,” she whispered, “from one wife to another.”

She laid the flowers tenderly on the grave and felt tears sting her eyes. She could not contain all the joy she was feeling; it was completely overwhelming her. Presently, Craig came up behind her and gently lifted her to her feet, then folded his arms around her and laid his cheek on her hair.

“I think she was looking after us,” Malle murmured. “She and Donnan. I am sure they were there when we needed them, and saved our lives.”

“They were,” Craig agreed. “Now, Lady Dunbar, I am hungry.”

“You are always hungry!” She laughed. “I swear that you could empty the castle stores singlehandedly!”

“When I said ‘hungry’,” he said mischievously, eyes twinkling, “did I mention food?”

~

I want to thank you for reading my Novel!
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epilogue for you!

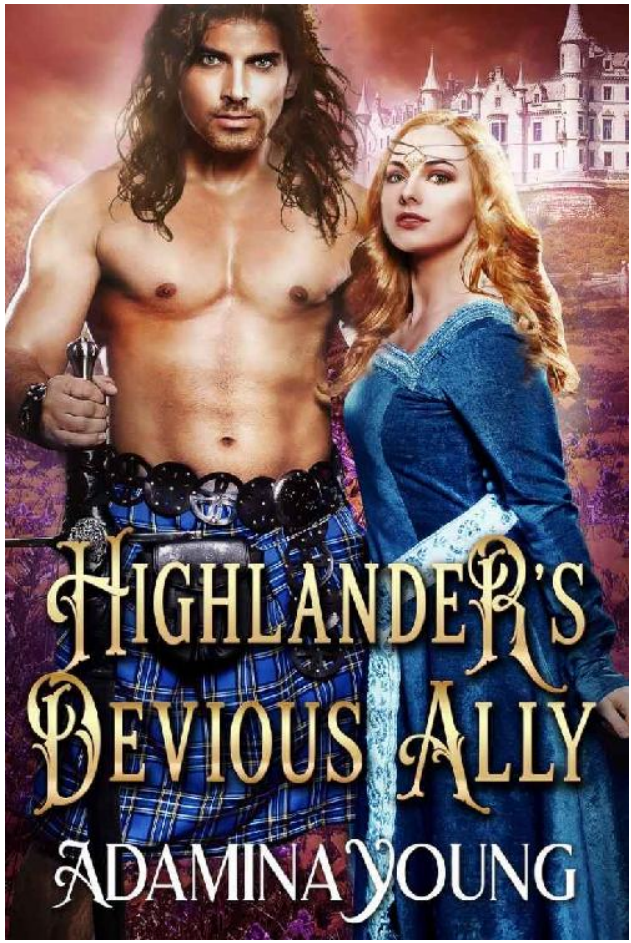
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Before you go, flip the page to read the story of Lyall and Ailith!


HIGHLANDER'S
DEVIOUS ALLY
ADAMINA YOUNG

Prologue

A week before her death, May Stevenson, Lyall and Fenella's mother, was talking about it almost as though she was looking forward to it.

"Remember, you two," she said, wagging a finger at them as they sat on either side of her bed, "I will be looking down on you from heaven —if I get there, of course!"

"Of course you will get there, Mama!" Fenella took her mother's hands between her own and laid them against her cheek. "And you and Papa can look down on us and wish nightmares upon us if we misbehave."

May laughed. "I would never do that," she laughed. Her gray-green eyes crinkled as she looked fondly at her daughter. Her voice was hoarse and her breathing was heavy and labored, but she had not lost her sense of humor.

"However, if you do not follow my instructions exactly, I will come back and haunt you!"

Lyall took May's other hand and kissed it, smiling at her. *God, I love her so much,* he thought. "So what are your instructions, Mama?"

May was suddenly seized by a bout of coughing that was so violent that she lost the power of speech for a moment. Fenella and Lyall looked at each other anxiously, then Lyall sat on the bed and put his arm around his mother. He waited until the paroxysm ceased, then gently kissed her hair.

"Perhaps you should stop talking now," he suggested.

"No!" Her voice was firm and definite. "I am not dead yet, Son, and I will talk until death steals my last breath from me!"

Lyall knew his mother; it was best to stay silent at a time like this. She then said, “As I was saying, I expect you both to marry nice, kind people. They do not have to be beautiful or rich, but they must be kind and generous. You must have at least four children each, two of each sex, to ensure a new generation of Stevensons. You and your children will all go to Confession once a month and confess every little trifle!”

She loved them and could not get enough of looking at their faces, as she knew that she did not have much longer to live. The consumption that had affected her for the last five years, which had stripped her of her flesh and almost robbed her of her breath, was greedily eating her up as if she were a tasty morsel of meat. However, she did not fear death, for she knew that her beloved husband Roy was waiting for her in heaven, having gone there six months previously, and she was desperate to see him again, for her life was empty without him.

As he was now the Laird proper of the Stevenson Estate, Lyall knew he would feel May’s absence keenly, for the weight of running the entire estate had landed on his shoulders after his father’s unexpected demise. His mother had been a constant source of support and advice, and he knew that when she died, not only would he miss her on an emotional level, he would feel the absence of her valuable help and support since she knew almost as much as her father had about matters of animal husbandry, agriculture, and accounting. She also had a way with people that he did not have and never would. She was not just his mother—she was one of the most extraordinary people he had ever met.

Presently May’s maid came in to give her a bed bath, then Fenella and Lyall kissed her and left.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Fenella burst into tears. Lyall put his arms around her and held her for a while. “Shhh, my little sister,” he murmured. “We will miss her, but she will be with Paw and will no longer be suffering. She will be in paradise.”

Fenella nodded. “I know, Lyall, but the thought of never seeing her again…” She burst into fresh sobs. Lyall gathered her more tightly against him, feeling as if he could weep himself.

He was ready, he told himself, over and over again. He was ready, but when May breathed her last breath, he realized he was nowhere near ready, and never would be.

The Funeral

May Stevenson's funeral was attended by the whole population of the village of Kinlochan, the estates surrounding it, and the tenant farmers for miles around, which was a measure of how much she was loved. She considered herself a very fortunate woman, and believed in sharing what she had with those who had much less.

The nobility looked down on her; indeed, there were those who thought her slightly soft in the head because of her charity work. They believed that God had given everyone his or her place in the world—some nobility, some peasants—and between those two a great gulf had been fixed, like that between heaven and hell.

May thought this was hypocritical in the extreme. As a student of the scriptures herself, she could quote chapter and verse from the Good Book and those brave enough to take her on soon found out that the little white-haired lady with the bright blue eyes was a force to be reckoned with.

Consequently, Lady May carried on feeding the poor, reading stories to the local children, and teaching the girls to sew. She was tireless in her efforts to improve the lives of everyday people. Her next project was a little school for the village children where they could learn how to write by the priest. They would need scrolls and ink, and desks. They could also help with chores that the priest had for them as a form of payment, learning more things in the meantime! She had everything planned, but the savagery of her illness, the scourge of consumption, had prevented her from making her dream a reality. And with her death, it would probably never become one.

Laird Lyall Stevenson was not good at being sociable, but a big funeral was expected by him. He cared nothing about the opinions of others,

and would have much preferred a smaller, private affair, but he had to think of his sister. At fifteen, Fenella was of the age when young men were beginning to notice her, and although a funeral was a solemn occasion, it was also a chance for the eligible members of both sexes to meet and mingle. He had little time for this, especially while he was mourning his beloved mother, but he would do anything for Fenella, whose future stretched out before her, still full of promise.

At the graveside Lyall had maintained a stiff and solemn dignity, while Fenella had sobbed on his shoulder. He wanted to weep himself, but the family honor depended on him appearing invincible.

Now he could see that Fenella appeared to have recovered a little, and was chatting to a group of friends, laughing occasionally, albeit in a subdued manner. He hoped she would recover quickly, since she had so much to look forward to, but she had the resilience of youth and a naturally happy disposition.

He decided to have a moment to himself and bounded upstairs to the first tier of the battlements where he could stand and think uninterrupted for a while.

Unfortunately, someone had got there before him. A very beautiful young woman was standing by one of the low parts of the crenellated wall, looking out to the sea. Her hair was waist-length and wavy, and of a shade somewhere between blonde and red. At any other time he would have welcomed her company, but not now. He was about to retrace his steps but she turned and saw him.

“M'Laird," she said, curtseying. “I am so sorry for your loss. Lady Stevenson was a good woman with a big heart, and we will all miss her.”

“Thank you,” Lyall replied. He was feeling the beginning of a headache behind his eyes and was not in the mood for talking to strangers, no matter how beautiful they were.

“I am Ailith Galloway," she introduced herself, then frowned. “Are you well, M'Laird?”

“No, I am not," he replied, then realizing how abrupt he sounded, he shook his head and apologized. “Forgive me, Mistress—it has been a

long, hard day."

Ailith looked at the big strong man before her with a feeling of pity. The castle was huge, the estate enormous, and his last source of moral support had gone. No wonder he looked so depressed.

"Of course it has, M'Laird," she said kindly. "I will leave you to your thoughts, and I will pray for you."

He gave her a smile and a little bow, then promptly forgot about her.

He stayed on the battlements for a little while, weeping out of sight of everyone else. It was a womanly weakness, he knew, but he could not help it; his mother, the rock upon which his life had been built, was no more, and now he had no one to lean on. He chided himself for his self-pity, but surely even the strongest man was allowed to cry at his mother's funeral?

He squared his shoulders and dashed away his tears, then went downstairs. He had to be strong for Fenella.

~

Ailith descended the stairs slowly, her face troubled. Poor Laird Stevenson looked like a man with the world on his shoulders, but she thought that a supportive wife might do him a world of good. She wondered why he was not yet married, since he was an attractive man in the prime of life, but no doubt he had personal reasons that were nothing to do with anyone else. She had felt a tug of attraction to him the first time she saw him, and wished that she had more time to spend with him, but she had no time to ponder the matter further.

Her betrothed, Jock McCauley, was striding towards her, smiling from ear to ear. He was a medium man in every way—medium height, medium build, hair that was a dun shade of brown, and gray eyes. He had been chosen for Ailith by her parents, who now lived on the Shetland island of Yell. They had known his parents and considered him "a good catch," but Ailith had her doubts.

"Ailie!" He came up to her and kissed her cheek. "Come and taste the roast pheasant. I should not really say this, but the best food is always

served at funerals!”

“No, Jock," she replied. “You should not say that. It is a most insensitive remark, and I hope the Laird does not hear you say such things.”

Jock arched his eyebrows in curiosity. “And why do you care what the Laird thinks?”

“I care about his feelings, as I would care about anyone in the same situation," she replied calmly. “He has just buried his mother, Jock. Show some compassion.”

Jock looked contrite. “You are right as usual, my sweetheart," he sighed, then gave her the sweetest smile he could muster. “I am a heartless brute and it is good of you to remind me of it!”

He’s doing that thing he always does, she thought, exasperated. *Telling me how bad he is so that I can tell him he is good.*

They stood for a while drinking wine and watching the other guests; Ailith loved to watch people. She loved to observe the way their bodies spoke, hear their unguarded remarks, and watch their faces as they scowled, smiled, and laughed.

Presently a very large man came striding towards them. He had curly black hair, dark blue eyes, and would have been handsome except there was something of a simpleton about him. His name was Findlay, and he was well-built, but moved in an awkward, gangling way, with his shoulders slumped and his arms hanging down by his sides. He had a constant foolish grin on his face—indeed, he was smiling now—and he was absolutely devoted to Jock, even though Jock treated him like a pet dog.

Findlay handed him a plate heaped with pheasant meat and looked eagerly at Jock for approval, like a dog bringing a ball back to his master.

Jock tasted the meat then patted Findlay on the back. “Excellent, Finn," he smiled. Then, referring to Ailith, he asked, “And could you fetch some for my lovely betrothed, please?”

Findlay nodded and was just about to turn away when Ailith stopped

him.

“Thank you, Finn," she said gently, smiling at the big man. “I am not hungry yet, but perhaps later.”

“I will have some ale, though,” Jock said.

Findlay smiled at them beatifically and shuffled off into the crowd to do Jock’s bidding.

“You treat him like a hound,” Ailith said angrily. “Just because he is a little dense does not mean that he has no dignity.”

“I hope you will not be like this when we get married,” Jock replied, sounding hurt. “I look after Finn out of the goodness of my heart. I took him into my home when his family died of smallpox and he had nowhere else to go. He appreciates everything I do for him and never complains. I feed him, give him a home, and if I ask for small services in return he is happy to do them for me. I know I am not perfect, Ailie, but I pity Findlay, and I do what I can for him.”

Ailith immediately felt remorseful. What Jock had said seemed true, but his manner of saying things often irritated her. Findlay was a tragic case indeed. When a family contracted smallpox and died the custom was that their home and everything in it should be razed to the ground to stop the infection from spreading. Findlay’s home was far south of Kinlochan, and he had wandered for miles as a starving beggar. When he got to the village, something about him had made Jock take pity on him, and since then Findlay had adored him.

Jock would not have been her choice of a husband, but he was a good man and she knew that he would never treat her badly.

“You are right, Jock," she sighed, “and I am sorry. I do not know what has come over me today. I think it’s that I feel sorry that such a good woman has died. She was an inspiration to us all.”

Jock put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her. “It comes to us all, my love," he said gently, “good or bad, rich or poor.”

Just then, the Laird himself came downstairs, and Ailith’s heart leapt; she felt as if she wanted to rush over and comfort him because he looked so bereft. No doubt it was because of the occasion, she told

herself. The combination of his handsomeness and the tragedy of his loss was a heady mixture and rendered him doubly attractive to the soft hearts of many women, herself included. However, unlike many other women, she was sensible enough to know that this was not love at first sight, but only a transient physical attraction that would disappear as soon as he was out of her sight. She turned away, chiding herself for being ridiculous, but Jock had seen the direction of her gaze.

“Handsome devil, isn’t he?" he asked, laughing to hide his envy. No woman had ever looked at him like that, and no matter how good his heart was, he could not help but feel a little cheated that he was not a tall strapping man like Lyall Stevenson.

Ailith shrugged. “There is more to life than looks," she remarked. “Beauty fades, but a good heart goes on and on." She paused, then said thoughtfully, “I wonder if I could help young Fenella to carry on what her mother started?”

“Why do you want to do that?” Jock asked, puzzled. “You have never shown any interest in charity work before.”

Ailith turned and smiled at him, then kissed him lightly on the cheek. “For the same reason that you befriended Findlay," she replied. “Because it is the right thing to do.”

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About the Author

Since she was a child, Adamina was inspired by stories of true love overcoming every obstacle! So, she started writing her first book at the age of 23!

A few years later, she met her own “Highlander” During their honeymoon, they decided to travel to Scotland. And then everything changed...

Adamina LOVES to connect with her readers, and reads all the messages she gets!

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